Menagerie 2

MENAGERIE

2

Published by
The Washington College Writers' Union
at the O'Neill Literary House

Edited and Layout by
Chris Watkins

Special Thanks To
All Contributors
Mike Taylor
Kelly Wagner
and Mike Wilson,
who started the ball...

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Wonder Where My World Began

Some nights meant
Mom in the yellow chicken cutlet kitchen
and spinach skillet butter drawn
Dad on the phone "on my way" and me
in the den and Scooby Doo and Chuck Scarborough;
sometimes the radio and Mommy singing, spinning
in the world she was brought in to, brought up in,
the life she brought upon herself.
Dinner and Daddy:
grave table
gravitating toward him—
attention and potatoes and fear?
Constructive criticism always for Chris,
Mommy's protests turned to disgust
later discussed on Sundays, war days....
They laughed but they knew
I knew
it was nothing new.
A green bathroom tiled floor—
I mapped out my life
(too many large pieces ousted the small ones)
while they tore theirs apart.
Curled in a ball clutching my sides
but I didn't have to take sides
you told me so
but Grandma's Italian whispershush
wasn't meant
for me to hear.
I couldn't speak couldn't help but understand
scathing foreign familiar tongues
speak multitudes when silenced.

-- Jennifer M. Hammer

-- Jeff Frank

Dedicated

I want to be your little woman
smiling just-ripe strawberries for you
to pare, with your thumb or your tongue --
finding my insides sweet and seedless, so
wet we both forget all that needless lot I know.

I want to be your quiet angel, halo
round and empty. Praise He, You,
who lets me be: only my own shadow --
taller, thinner, and ever silent in the sun
that makes me lie for you, my only one.

-- Kelli Youngblood

psuedo

always stands behind me in lines
at the grocer's, in the thriftstore
i'm leaving town
it's going for cheap

my psyche
for your $5.99, try it on
pull up those pantyhose, man
sharpen that pointed chin

refine your desire

toss me nothing to nibble on,
see you fade out,

fake back in.

-- Raymond Cummings

#14

For M.M.

You do not flow like coffee through my blood:
Slowing, not speeding, is your type of brew.
Soaking skin and soul in warm-water flood,
I drench myself in tepid tea of you.
An eerie immersion, a magic kind:
Your warmth starts within and ripples out.
No addicting drug, but nature refined;
A whisper, a muffled kiss, not a shout.
I float serenely in your beverage eyes,
Two small tea-cups my only world for now.
You steam and soothe, but continually surprise:
Essence the same, flavor varies somehow.
Fickle coffee produces just withdrawal
But constant tea settles and makes me all.

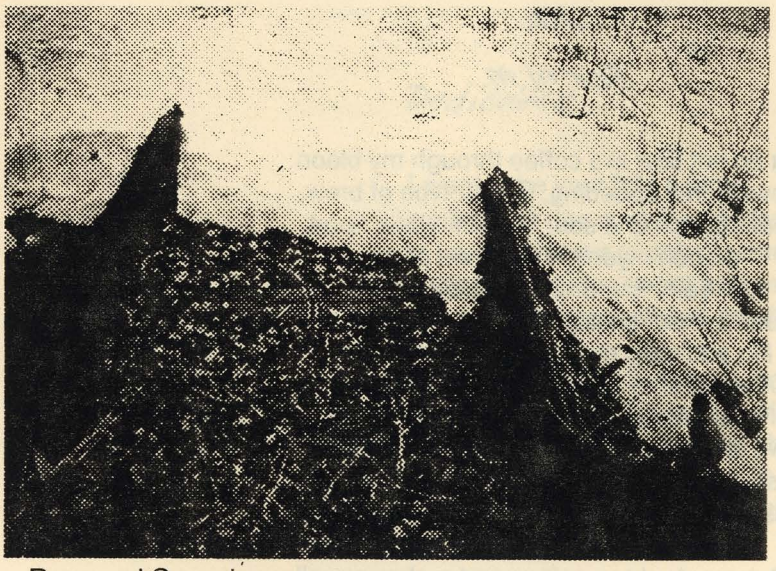
-- Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

Snob in a Box

Some children
are sloppy, careless
colorers. They press
too hard on tips,
insistently disobey
lines, and do not grieve
over broken
lemon yellows.

Odd, isn't it --
these are the same
children who own the crayon
box sets of 64?

-- Jen Ward



-- Raymond Cummings

The Silver Spoon

My sister died just the other day
In a strike that ended in a terrible way
While she was walking in the picket line -
She had no weapon, not even a sign!

The national guard was ordered in,
Their guns flared loud - the government sinned
Of hypocrisy again not free,
They had broken up the Bonus Army.

The card-board walls of the Hooverville burned
The veterans by their government spurned
While far away they were forced to flee
No one would help the Bonus Army.

We all sat by with our margarined bread
As the bonus troops were dispersed and fled;
The cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon
Little boy blue and the man-in-the-moon.

I went to the movies for awhile today
But this time the tears wouldn't go away
When ya comin' home, sis, when ya comin' home?
I wish that you had come home that day.

--Ryan McAllister

Leafsail

Sailing leaves in pothole puddles

Depressions filled
with rainday residual;
upon such leavings
I set the day's dead free

-- Jennifer M. Hammer

I See Dragons in the Lily Fields

My eyes, I unchain and unfetter
and I transversed my soul to the gardens of pain
'cause I needed to feel something better,
I wanted dragons in the lily fields.
Where the dead are never buried,
reality scurries and gremlins grin while the beauty yields.
Where dragons pervade a kingly roam,
monsters growl, virtues turn foul,
and dogs of doom howl and moan.
Where the peaceful sleep,
precious predators lightly creep
and the skies and seas always bleed
with the liveliest red from mortals bled
in a world where there is constant war.
Here in the world of war
my soul did soar to the second system right of center,
rode the snake to the west of heaven
and touched the face of the zeppelin door
Where the entrance is always given but escapism never goes,
where sins and salvation wreak havoc upon mortal souls
with no false pretenses of goodness,
but goodness in truth dirty and hard
delicate sentiments are destroyed,
devils overjoyed beat back the hopes which never grew too far.

-- Tim Croissette

Luke's New Poem

He says, "her eyes are the color of the dawn
Sky, virginal and flirtatious,"
While contemplating giving up women.

Yet only in that moment, never having suspected
The sun to creep out of its blanket of darkness,
Was the pressing heat of day forgotten.

"Because of her eyes,"
He says.

On a day much later,
He rubs the dust from his eyes
And brushes the remains
From the bed.

--Luke Owens

In the Place Where We Are

-- Jackie Smith

—You know he says it.
—Says what? Huh? The infamous "n" word?
—He says the fucking word!
—So he calls me a nigger.
—He says—
—Then that makes you a nigger lover, doesn't it?

she laughs.

—Don't make jokes like that.
—And uppity? Last time I heard that one used to describe Black people was on The Eyes on The Prize series. Wake up, Pop Pop.
—Don't do that.
—I am just telling the truth. If I'm a nigger you're still my lover. So...

reluctant.

—I'm a nigger lover... Why you so crash sometime?
—Why do you tell me what he says??? Geez...your grandfather is crash.
—He is still my grandfather.
—Right.
—Right?
—Yeah, he is your grandfather not mine. I don't haveta love him.
—He could end up being your grandfather-n-law.
—Are you trying to tell me something?
—No, I am saying in conversation that it could be.
—You trying to kill your grandfather? He'd die if you ever married me.
—He'd doesn't haveta know.
—I'd be your secret?
—You'd be my future.
—Does he know what year this is?
—He's old for the sake of God he was born in 1916, girl.
—That's his excuse? or is that yours?
—He doesn't understand. He isn't from this time and place. He forgets we have t.v. sometime.
—Forgets we are past the civil rights movemnent.
—Yeah exactly. He's old and he doesn't understand.
—So it's okay for him to hate me and call me a nigger?
—You know I don't believe that.
—What do you tell your old pop-pop when he calls me a nigger?

silence.

—Nothing.
—What can I say?
—I donno, maybe something like Pop-Pop don't call her that. What you're saying isn't right. You don't know her. Stop calling her that...
—That'd be disrespecting him, besides that Pop-Pop won't listen to me.
—How are we ever gonna fix what's wrong?
—He'll die.
—He'll die?
—Soon he'll die and so will his ideas.
—He'll die but his ideas will still be here in your parents, you and a lot of other Americans.
—Me?
—You.
—I love you and you're a black woman.
—What ideas did you've about me before you knew me and don't lie.
—Why are we talking about this?
—Be honest.
—I am.
—Tell me then.
—Okay, I thought you were hot, really hot!
—And the way I danced.
—Girl, it made me horny as hell.
—Did you think I was exotic?
—Y'know what I thought.
—You called me exotic!
—It was a compliment, girl.
—Said you were curious.
—Well...
—It wasn't a compliment.
—I realize that now—
—Y'know what that word means? Exotic? Meaning something foreign, unusual... I am neither!
—Love you.
—You think your grandfather thinks I'm exotic, a jungle bunny, a gorilla in the mist ?
—I don't ask.
—But he still tells.
—Yeah.
—So?

silence.

—He says you're beautiful.
—Your Pop-Pop says that? Come on now. He says "she's beautiful?"
—In his own words.
—The words?
—I'm not saying. It's not important. I am the one who loves you.

—Fine.
—Now you're mad, right?
—No, I'm fine.
—Yeah, you're mad, Ms. Pouty!

silence.

—My turn.
—For what?
—What does your momma and poppa think of me?
—They think you're interesting.
—Interesting?
—Honestly they do and my father thinks I am not in love with you.
—Really?
—Yep.
—He knows you pretty well.
—Yep he does.
—So?
—So?
—Well?
—Well?
—Do you love me?
—If I didn't do you think I would go through all of this? Being called a nigger by your grandfather and what not? Do you think I'd still be here?
—Are you happy?

silence.

—Do you realize that we are very young? I mean we are twenty and twenty-two and we talk like this.
—Do you have to be fifty to love?
—No.
—So what's your point?
—I'm just saying we could fall out of love tomorrow.
—Or today.
—Exactly. We really aren't in love... that could be a possibility.
—Oh shit, come on, are you telling me you don't love me?
—No, have you been listening?
—You're pissing me off.
—Alan Grandalyn Rimmel the fourth, if you ever got really angry with me would you call me a nigger?
—What?
—Would you call me a nigger?
—Why do you ask me that?
—Curious. My father said you would.
—He knows nothing 'bout me.
—When people are mad they try to hurt each other.
—I know, but I wouldn't.
— I would call you a honkey!

he laughs.

—Yeah and I would die laughing, girl.
—I'm serious—or a cracker—or something.
—Oooooooh cracker! or something. Please no, not that one.
—I'm serious! Why are you laughing?
—Cause you're funny.
—Fuck you.
—Come on now, precious, I am sorry.
—Would you ever leave me for a white woman?
—Huh?
—You hard of hearing now?
—No... where's this coming from?
—My momma says you would.
—Jesus of Nazareth!
—It makes sense. That is your color, the ideal woman — the American standard of beauty — so what stops you? It is what both of your parents would like you to have, not to mention Pop-Pop.
—Fuck me upside down!
—And not to mention those freaks on your little Lax team... Then again they like to ask you shit like "What's it like to be with a Black woman?" I swear they get me sick.
—And I tell them it's the best sex I ever had.
—Answer my question.
—What question?
—Would you leave me for a white woman?
—Fuck!
—Answer my question.
—Hello!!! I love you. This isn't a phrase! I am not on a black woman trip or tasting exotic waters or some bull shit like that. I really don't care if your parents think that I'm — wait — I do care, but what they believe is not true. I think you are beautiful! Everything about you, y'know , that includes your black skin, brown eyes—
—Nappy hair?
—Yes, nappy hair! Grow a fucking fro and I'd love you like never before.

laugh.

—I approached you because I was attracted to you.
—Uh-uh that's not what happened! I approached you, remember? At the Beach Bash. You couldn't believe a Black woman was attracted to you, remember? I do. Where I come from Black Woman would never hook up with a white guy. Blah Blah hiddy hiddy ha ha. Mr. Newtown Square, remember? All you saw was me as a Black woman and you as a White male.
—Ah.. that's Mainline...Berwyn, Ms. Thang! And you didn't know I was White?
—Hell yeah I knew , white as white is, look up the definition of white and there you are with a lacross stick in hand.
—Oh really. But it must be good cause you're here.
—No denying I thought you were attractive because

you were attractive, a cutie, but not cause you were White.
—I'm suave.
—Oh?
—Yeah.
—Alrighty then.
—A Black woman never approached me before you. I thought it'd be interesting to hook up with one.
—Interesting? You fucking jerk! What did you think I'd have an extra fucking breast or vagina?
—I'm telling you the truth. And you?
—I didn't think anything was so fascinating about you... I just thought you were cute, but I forget your ass was born in a place with no Black folk, Planet White.
—Stop being so mean — don't tease.
—Aight, aight,but I must admit you did freak me out.
—How?
—You don't remember?
—I donno what you're talking 'bout.
—Hmmmm. Mmmmmm! What are you thinking? Oooooh make me cum everywhere..oooh oh my God! You feel so good! Ah girl, you feel so good.
—Shush.
—Nope had you saying my name all night.
—Why you gotta go there?
—Nice place to be.
—Shush. You didn't have to go there.
—So you remember?
—Hey you weren't quiet.
—I know, I was telling you to shut up!
—I love being with you.
—I know.
—It's 1996.
—Yeah.
—1996 and we're dealing with this.
—Yep.
—Geez!
—You say we are products of a racist culture.
—How do your parents feel?
—It's my choice. They realize that.
—Love me?
—Welcome you with open arms after I beat them and cried and whined for two months. I told you they knew I was coming to see my girlfriend but they never saw a picture or anything, but when they finally did they—
—How'd they find out?
—The picture of us kissing.
—They'd do it.
—My mom goes, "Alan Grandalyn Rimmel," in a high pitched voice, "who is this woman?" And I said "what woman?" She wouldn't say Black, she said "this" which meant Black. "Alan, who is this woman?"
—Unhuh. So?
—And I asked "huh?"
—You were afraid?
—Apprehensive, y'know, kinda weird feeling because I knew what the "this" was. "This." I wanted to laugh because she wouldn't say Black and I wouldn't acknowledge the "this". Finally she came outta my room and she has our picture. The one where we're outside at the boathouse.
—Poor mom.
—Unhuh, and I said "mom, that is my girlfriend."
-Girlfriend?
—Yep. She asked "the girlfriend that you went to see?" I said yes. She said "this girl?" And I am thinking "yep this black woman is my girlfriend." She didn't say a thing for a while, then she says kinda quietly, "she's beautiful, Alan." My father came down and lectured me saying he isn't racist or anything and he loves me but others are not going to be so accepting.
—Oh the accepting speech.
—They accept you.
—Maybe they tolerate me cause of you.
—They like you a lot.
—Do they tell Pop-Pop?
—What did your parents do?
—When you visited me?
—My father, 'he bout had a fit! I swear the man almost swallowed his own tongue. He took it as a threat against him as a Black man.
—As a Black man?
—Definitely. I am in love with you and you are not a Black man. That hurt my father and I can understand why. He raised me, this beautiful Black man, and all his life it is thrown in his face that he wasn't nothing because he wasn't a white man, and then look what his daughter does. He kinda felt that he wasn't good enough. Guess upset too. But he wants me to be happy, so —

silence

—Where does that leave us?
—Here.
—That is?
—Personally I donno. It ain't that simple.
—Do you wanna marry me?
—Are you proposing?
—Why can't you just answer me?
—Cause it ain't that simple.
—So?
—Are you proposing?
—You wouldn't, would you?

silence.

—What?
—You wouldn't, would you? I'm okay to date but you wouldn't marry a white guy.
—How you figure?

—I'm okay temporarily but for the real deal never.
—You're pissing me off!
—So what. It's true.
—Stop it!
—It's true. Every time I ask the question you skirt around it.
—Answer me this, Alan, was I the one who thought you were exotic — something extravagant or different between your damn thighs? It wasn't such a big fucking deal for me. I wasn't the one who ran back to tell all those other stupid motherfuckers that I had hooked up with a white man like it was something to be balked at. You thought I was something to oooh ahh over like I was a fucking alien or something. Remember? I approached you 'cause I thought you were attractive, not because I wanted to know what it was like to be with a white boy, but I wanted to know what it was like to be with you. Understand? So don't you dare tell me what I'm about!
—Baby?

silence. frustration.

—Baby?
—Hump?
—I didn't mean it like that.
—Why do you ask me that all the time? You hint around marriage like a game. I think you want me to say no.
—I'd ask and want you to say no?
—I think you want me to.
—Why?
—To make it easier for you.
—Easier?
—Yes, then you are let out.
—Losing you wouldn't be easy.
—Boy, you got frustrated. You got me waiting to exhale!
—Push it out, sista! Exhale!

laugh.

—All my friends and all your friends and who ever don't like us together can bounce.
—Like a ball, boo. Like a ball.
—You just so down now, huh?
—You teasing me?
—You just so down.
—I's down.

singing.

—Alan wanna be down with what I'm going through. Wanna be d-o-w-n!!!
—Telling your whole life with my words. I'm stringing your pain with my fingers—killing you softly.
—Oh, shit, you wyle-cliff now?
—I sing a good song.

laugh.

—So this is where we are?
—This is where we are.
—Where does this leave us?
—Here.
—We got each other?
—I ain't going no where.
—So maybe we both can exhale.

deep breath. sigh. exhales.

-- Raymond Cummings

Aardvark

The word of the day is "aardvark". Use it with all the deliriousness of a man in a small clear enclosure. He can see the outside and he hungers for it, but it is beyond his grasp. He reaches and cries, but all to no avail, for he is damned, just as the man who uses "aardvark". There is no escape and there shall be no escape. It should be used at every available opportunity. It has been proclaimed and now the masses must be alerted to it. They will not understand, but then the masses never do understand. It is not their job. They will pretend, because that is what they do best.

I sit by the fire remembering experiences I had as a child. No matter how much I think, I cannot remember being a child. My mother told me to sit in the corner one evening. I tried to reason with her; there are no corners in my head. I ran around in circles, my feet continually beating on the padded floor, watching the white walls pass by, each time certain that there would be a corner on the next pass. I ran until I vomited, and my mother stood over me. Aardvark.

-- Matthew Kory

Eve of Confusion

Forsaken twine-sheets,
endless drowse of
fluttered lids.

Twisted subconscious;
a mirror reception
we call the other's soul
but, find no cry to our fright.

Wailing, whispering,
wanting to discern differences
created by eternity;
forming deceptive
positions of delight.

-- Jessica Chester

-- Jen Ward

Grandpa, Tell Me About Cunningham...

-- Jeff Frank

"Grandpa, just because Jerry has more toys than I do, does that mean he has more fun than I do?"

"Don't be fooled, kid. Just because the boy is rich... I'll tell ya, don't let people ever get you to believe that rich people aren't ever happy, because that'd be a load of crap. But happiness is relative. You know how you feel when you're at your happiest? Rich kids don't feel any happier than that. Happiness isn't something you can get with stocks and bonds. With money, you can fulfill basic needs, you can feel happy more often. But when you're having fun and you feel at your happiest, that's infinity happiness. And kid, with happiness, there's no such thing as infinity plus one."

"Tell me more, Grandpa. Tell me about Cunningham."

"Cunningham. Cunningham. I once had this friend named Cunningham. All laws of logic defied him. He was mad as a hatter..."

"What's a hatter?"

"It's a person that makes hats."

"Why are they mad?"

"Mad means crazy. Not all of them were really crazy. There were stereotyped because of a popular fairy tale about some girl that fell in a hole and played cards and fed a rabbit... or something. Anyway, she met this crazy guy who made hats, and had lunch with him... or something. Well, Cunningham was crazy. He used to ride his bike around, howling..."

"Why?"

"I don't know why. That's why he was crazy. When someone does something, and you can't think of any reasonable explanation why they would do something like that, they're crazy. He used to annoy my mother. She hated him. She used to say that she could stand all my friends, but she couldn't stand Cunningham. First, she hated that he would never say anything when he saw her. He would just ignore her and go up to my room and tap his feet on the floor, which really annoyed her. She used to swear

he was stomping his feet just to bother her. Then, I started getting him to say "hello" to her. She found that she hated that even more. He said it in a really strange tone of voice, and that's what she didn't like."

"How did he say it?"

"Hello, Mrs. Frank."

"That's weird. Why did he do that?"

"I told you, he's crazy. When he was younger, he wouldn't even knock on the door. He would stand outside the front door until somebody walked by and saw him, and invited him in. "That boy has a screw loose somewhere." my mother used to say. He would come up to my room and bang pens and pencils on my desk. He wouldn't stop even when I asked him. He usually broke the pencils. He would run around the room, and once... and once, he tried to light the wall on fire with a lighter. It was dangerous to keep matches and lighters and sparklers and firecrackers around, because he would light things on fire. He was a dangerous kind of crazy."

"Remember, if you don't understand something someone is doing, they're crazy. Loony."

"You shouldn't play with fire."

"I know. When I was in College, I would go home some weekends, and I would visit him, since he lived right next door. He would show me some of the crazy poetry he had written. I would have been gone for a month, come home and visit him, and he'd pull out a big stack of paper and say: 'Here's the nineteen pages of poetry I wrote while you were gone.' He was crazy."

"What was the poetry like, Grandpa? Tell me a poem."

"I don't remember any of the poems. You just don't remember crazy stuff like that. He used a lot of big vocabulary words he had used. Cunningham was a regular word-a-day calendar. You couldn't understand most of the poetry because of the big words. You weren't sure if he was using them right because you didn't know what they meant. They might not have even been real words. They sure looked like real words though. All the while I was there looking at his poems, trying to question as to how things were in the neighborhood or at school, he would be kicking a soccer ball or a tennis ball or something around the basement, with no concern for the laws of physics... the boy was crazy! He would be kicking a tennis ball, and it would be bouncing off walls and the ceiling and desks and even me."

"Why did he do that?"

"I don't know. Remember, if you don't understand something someone is doing, they're crazy. Loony."

"What happened to Cunningham?"

"Well, it would seem that the only fit ending to a story like this would be to say that some people hauled him off to an institution in a straight-jacket, but that's just not true. He teaches English in a high school. Probably still loony as a lion, though. Kicking tennis balls at his students and howling away."

"Why are lions loony?"

"I don't know. They just are."

"But why are they?"

"You ever seen a lion doing anything? On television?"

"Yeah. They lay around in the grass."

"Now what do you suppose they do that for?"

"Because they're tir..."

"Didn't think you knew! They lay there for no reason. They're crazy. Those lions are as loony as Cunningham!"

An Audience with Caesar

-- Bob Brown

On our first date, Sally took me downtown to a block of the city she called Club Row. The regular street scenes were replaced here by an irregular mass of habitues, chippers, and whiz kids out for a good time, accompanied by a cacophony of various club sounds...

We had already danced at the Deep Freeze and The Glamour Box clubs, so I had asked if we could take a breather at a more laid back kind of club... Sally had *finally* given in (the girl is a machine on the dance floor) and brought me here. Now we were negotiating our way through the crowd in this packed club, slowly making our way toward the bar.

This place was called What's Your Sign? and the floor was glassed over. Underneath the glass was arranged a breath-taking assortment of road signs and other public notice signs including some real antique stuff. "Drug Free School Zone" hadn't been produced in ages, and yet I saw a couple. The lighting was a contrasting array of black lights, purples, neon greens, whites and pale yellows. Old traffic lights adorned the corners, changing and blinking intermittently. On the ceiling, in luminescent paint, was the zodiac, splayed across the length and width of the huge room. Leo, Capricorn, even my own, Sagittarius. It was a very cool bar, although I prefer personally the more classical 19th century throw-back like the Victorian Pub, which is right outside of Renton.

"There's dancing here too," Sally yelled back at me (she was leading me by the hand) "but you can also sit down, relax and enjoy a drink here."

That sounded good to me. Finally we squeezed through the last obstacles in front of the bar and took seats on two stools. Sally looked around as though she were expecting to see someone she didn't. The bartender, a female orc, moved over to us.

"Hey Sally, what's your pleasure?"

"Two Rhomba Shooters. How's biz, Shiela?"

"It's a good crowd for the hour. It'll really pick up when the Olympia closes in 45 minutes."

"Well, let me introduce you. Shiela MacArthy, this is Tom Meyers."

"Pleased to meet you."

"Like wise. Any friend o' Sally's."

"Say, where's the gang?"

"Caesar has them parked over in your booth. Told me the bar was too jumpy tonight."

"That sounds like him. See you in a bit maybe."

"Sure thing, honey. Good meetin' you, Tom."

She went back to other customers and we turned back toward the crowd.

"Caesar?"

"He's a friend of mine who's a regular here. He and Shiela go way back. He's one of the first people I met when I started coming here. He's a great guy."

"And he has a gang?"

"The same way Shaggy, Scooby, Fred and the girls were. You know, a group of friends."

"Oh, ok... I'm new to all this club stuff. Bear with me."

She led me by the hand once again through the crowd toward the far wall, where booths and tables were arranged to grant patrons optimum access to the dance floor. We headed toward the far corner, which was partially separated from the rest of the club by a chrome and neon partition. We moved past the partition and there were people there who were obviously good friends of Sally's. She hugged the three women who were there, and gave and received kisses on the cheek from the two men. One of the guys and one of the girls were elves, the rest human.

I nodded to each once in turn. They smiled their greetings. Except Caesar. He gazed at me with strange eyes and seemed to be drinking in my every feature.

"Everyone, this is Tom. Tom, these are my friends Crystal, Terri, Julian, Kara, and Caesar."

I nodded to each once in turn. They smiled their greetings. Except Caesar. He gazed at me with strange eyes and seemed to be drinking in my every feature. His eyes were a reflective green with vertical slits like a cat's. Not the oddest thing I had ever seen and I was smart enough not to stare, but their impression stayed in my mind.

"Girls," Sally said, "would you like to accompany me to the ladies' room?"

"Sure thing." The girls stood in unison and moved as one through the crowd toward the rest rooms.

Julian stood up too.

"I'm going to go get a refill. Either of you

need anything?"

Both of us shook our heads, and the elf moved off through the crowd toward the bar.

I glanced over at Caesar just trying to gauge who or what this guy was. Shorter than me by a couple of inches, but very cut. He looked about thirty, but it was a young thirty. His blond hair, which he wore in a mass of short dred locks, was concealed by an olive green baseball cap. I couldn't be entirely sure, but it looked like he had a bag of some sort (magical?) around his neck. One thing I knew for sure was that he was packing. I could see the handle of a revolver on the far side under his jacket, and the bulge on the near side revealed the presence of a similar weapon there as well.

"So... Tom... What business are you in?"

"Until recently I was an aeronautical engineer with Aerodox Industries."

"They went under didn't they?"

"Sure did."

"What have you been doing since?"

"I've been involved with cars."

"I see... and Sally?"

"No, I just got involved with her."

"Ha ha," he smiled. "No, I meant how is it you met her?"

"She was my secretary... is, my secretary... She and I have grown mutually interested."

"I see."

I was feeling uncomfortable. Few people have this affect on me, but this guy was downright disconcerting.

"Wonder what's keeping the girls."

"They are discussing you, of course."

"Oh."

"Those four will be in there awhile, and Sally will be answering far more personal questions that I have put to you."

"Yes, I see... well... what business are you in?"

"I invest independently. For example, I made a small fortune when the company that bought out yours, Bet-tech Systems, went under."

"Oh, really??... Glad that helped someone."

"Do you care for Sally?"

"Yes, I do. She has always been there for me, and I am beginning to realize now what she means to me."

"That's good... it is nice to have someone."

"Do you? Have someone, that is?"

"Uh huh. She is in Japan on business for the next two months. When she gets back, we are to be married."

"Wow, that's great. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"Oh, here come the girls (thank God)... looks like Sally wants to dance. I'll talk to you again maybe."

I made my way toward Sally, thankful to see her beautiful face and curvaceous form again. I took her in my arms and we began to dance.

"Weird guy."

"Caesar?"

"Hmmm mmm."

"Well, he's no the oddest shaman I ever met."

"Shaman?"

"He didn't tell you?"

"Nope. Said he was an investor. Told me he made money off the Aerodox deal. Yippee good for him."

"That's his day job. It pays for his other, more secret endeavors. he's one of those street operative people."

"Really? One of them, huh?"

"Yes. I don't know how his girlfriend stays sane. I would worry myself sick over him."

(I really need to tell her what I do for a living.) "So what kind of shaman is Caesar?"

"Well, I don't know much about magic and all, but Julian told me that Caesar followed and was chosen by Lion. Whatever that means."

"I have a friend who follows Wolf. I know what it means, sort of. Each animal, totem, I think they're called, has a personality or set of guidelines. The shaman must emulate these to continue to maintain a good standing and strong relationship with his animal persona."

"Oh, wow... you know more about this stuff than I do."

The rest of the night went by, with Sally and I spending time with Caesar and the rest of her pals. Turned out Crystal and Julian were married. She was a programmer and he was a systems analyst for TridScope Enterprises, a small communications corporation which was subsidiary of one of the larger Japanese conglomerates. Terri was media producer for the Seattle Evening Digest news program, which covered mostly local events dealing in politics and civic issues. Kara worked as an advertising executive for McKaffey and Steen, a mid-sized firm based in Tacoma with a branch in Seattle. It seemed only Caesar, whatever his real name was, had any sort of link to the streets.

I filed this in the back of my mind, planning to remember his name. No doubt though, I would remember those eyes.

The next few days I juggled keeping a low profile with spending time with Sally. A couple of jobs my associates and I had been involved in had run a little hot and there was no sense in bringing unwanted attention to ourselves.

The group consisted of Changeling, the elven urban warrior, who was much metal as flesh at

this point. Her past was locked away in shadows and secrets. Wolfie, the Wolf shaman and undercover cop; he walked a fine line, but nowadays, cops bend the rules as much as crooks, so who noticed? Next was Fritz. The German agent turned Seattle operator who could rig all things electronic. Then there was Willow, another gorgeous elven female with contacts in high places and European circles. She was a mage who worked wonders, weaving energies with lethal precision. All of us were killing time at my place, a four bedroom, two and a half bath three story house in Renton.

"So what are we going to do?" Changeling asked as she paced around the center of my living room. Wolfie looked up from a magazine he had been casually perusing.

"Why don't you sit down and we can talk about it."

"There really isn't that much to talk about, "she said, "either we go and fulfill the contract or we back out and lose a lot of face."

"I didn't lose anything in Egypt, "Fritz said, turning in his chair to face her, "but I have no objection to going. After all, they are willing to pay us."

I contributed my penny's worth as well. "Look, why don't we make a few calls, find out how hot it is over there, consider the risks, and decide if we want to chance it. As far as face goes, no one will ever know we backed out because the corporation will never admit they wanted the job done."

"Ok, we'll talk to some people, but I still am not certain I want to go."

"Oh Changeling, traveling is good for you." Willow said, taking her friend by the arm reassuringly, " Besides, there's no telling what we may find in Egypt that could make the whole trip worthwhile."

I grabbed my jacket and headed toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Wolfie asked, "We're in the middle of a debate and Changeling is having a moment."

I smiled, "I'm going to go talk to people."

I drove over to Sally's and knocked on the door.

"Hey you, " She smiled and let me in. I turned and kissed her in reply.

"I wanted to come over and see you, but I also need to pick your brain and tell you some stuff about me."

"Really? Well, what's up?"

"Well, remember the other night at the club, you were telling me that your friend Caesar was one of those street operative people?"

"Yeah....I don't like where this is going."

"I didn't think you would. Anyway, I am one too. I pull jobs for individuals, corporations, I've even done stuff for governments."

"Oh God, Tom, I don't believe this. You're an engineer. I work for you. In an office, remember?"

"Yes, I am an engineer, but I also do this. I did not pay for that house I live in solely on an engineer's salary."

She looked at me, her face pinched in a mask of concern and thought. Finally, she let out a sigh.

"Well, I'm glad you told me. Be careful, ok? Now, what is it you need to know?"

"I have a job coming up. I want to bring Caesar in."

I wasn't prepared for the look Sally gave me. I couldn't tell if it was fear, surprise, or trepidation. It was not pleased. I waited for her to say something again.

"What?"

"Tom, I don't know about that. Caesar is very secretive. He's my friend, yes, but I have no idea what kind of work he's into. All I know about him is what he or Julian tells me. I don't even know what his real name is."

"I have a plan, Sally, you just need to trust me. I don't plan on going on this job. But I need someone who can fill the role I do on the team and go with them so I can orchestrate things back here."

"Where is this job?"

"Egypt, parts of Europe, and Greece."

"Overseas? What kind of job is this?"

"It's best that you don't know. But the team needs someone who's connected stateside so if something goes wrong there will be some attempt to make things right. I am only one who can do that. Besides, I am not willing to be separated from you that long."

"Awww, you mean that?"

"You know I do. I love you, Sally, and I'm not galloping off to Egypt when all I need is right here in Seattle."

She locked her arms around my neck and kissed me. I held her tight and then she asked, "So you need Caesar to look after the team so you can stay here with me."

"That's right. Caesar's a pro, you can just tell. He wears that rep like it's cologne. You can smell it on him. He is the one I need for this job."

"I don't know how to contact him."

"Didn't you say that bartender and him knew each other pretty well. Old friends or something?"

"Yeah, that's right! Shiela would know for sure how to reach him."

"Can you give her a call for me?"

"Of course."

Sally sat down at her comm console. After typing in the number and waiting for the call to processed, Shiela's face appeared on the view

screen.

"Hey Sally, what's up?"

"Not much, Shiela. I needed to ask a favor."

"Always happy to help out a regular. What can I do for ya?"

"I need to get in contact with Caesar right away. Do you know his number?"

Shiela looked distracted for a moment, then set her gaze again into the screen.

"Yeah, I have it, but I can't just give it out to anyone. He's very private."

"I know Shiela, but it involves some urgent business interests and I would really appreciate it. I'll take full responsibility."

"Ok, Sally. Fair enough."

Shiela gave Sally the number, which I immediately fed into the comm. Caesar appeared on the screen, cat-like eyes boring into me like neon lasers.

"Tom...how did you get this number?"

"A little legwork and a lot of help. I have a proposition for you."

"A business proposal? I assume you're not referring to stocks."

"No stocks. Real biz."

"You realize I am extraordinarily busy and that my time is very precious."

"Of course. I consider my own time to be valuable. Just give me a chance to lay this idea out for you."

I could almost see the shaman weighing options. His eyes darted about slightly and his mouth moved silently.

"Very well. Name a place, and I will be there in thirty minutes."

"The South Parking Lot at the KingDome.

"The South Lot, 1:15...agreed."

* * *

I pulled my jeep into the South Lot. The KingDome was deserted at this hour, and the huge sports facility loomed silently like a mountain.

The wind tugged at my hair and I listened to the sounds of the traffic on the distant highway. I recited quietly what I would say to Caesar when he arrived.

A truck entered the parking lot. I wondered who this could be. I didn't have long to wait. The pick-up stopped along side of my jeep and out stepped Caesar. The shaman was wearing a camel hair overcoat along with the same olive green ball cap he'd worn at the club. His eyes, those bright green reflective eyes, picked up the light and aimed it out in every direction.

"I didn't picture you as the pick-up type."

"Yes, well, I'm full of surprises. What can I do for you, Mr. Meyers?"

"I want to offer you a business opportunity."

As we stood there, the fog swirled around the parking lot and the moon periodically broke through the clouds.

"And what sort of opportunity could you offer me?"

"It's an interesting little show I have in the works. A team of operatives travels to Europe and Africa seeking a few powerful magical items....call them artifacts."

The wind tugged at my hair and I listened to the sounds of the traffic on the distant highway. I recited quietly what I would say to Caesar when he arrived.

"So I would acquaint you with the lands and the treasures of the world at large. How important that is to the lives, you and your riding job company others to far off and deprive their historical sures and their tage. How lightful. Sleep night, do you?"

"Look, it's ness. And tant business at lot of people's maybe some care about, are on how well this goes. And you wouldn't be going with me. I don't think I could stand a fifteen hour plane ride with you. You'd be going in my place."

"Passing the buck, are we? Are you afraid to go, Tom? Is that it?"

"I can't leave Sally. Not with all the unrest and disturbances that have been going on. If I leave and something happens to her I would never forgive myself."

"How quaint. And I thought chivalry was dead. So I travel to exotic places and play treasure hunter while you protect the fair maiden. What's in it for me?"

"You get to work with a team of top pros on a well planned job. It has its financial rewards as well, but you seem to have enough."

"One can never have enough. But you miss the most obvious benefit, Tom."

"What's that?"

"I leave my friend Sally in the protection of one who would die to protect her and who cherishes her more than all else in this life. Truly a rare benefit."

"So you'll go?"

"One moment. I am not going solely so that you can stay here and make love to Sally and play the good boyfriend. What's your contribution to all of this, as I am sure you'll make sure you're paid."

"If you go in my place, my job is to use our

group's connections overseas to our best advantage. I will the puppeteer, so to speak. If you all get caught crossing into Egypt and find yourself in prison, it is my job to make calls that will result in the political pressure necessary for you to be released. I become the state-side quarterback. Understand?"

"Of course. My own fiance is still a little over two month's away from returning to me. I wish she had thought to find a substitute. Very well, Mr. Meyers, you have my services. I expect to call the shots and I will require thirty-five percent of any profits accumulated through our endeavors. The remaining seventy-five percent can be argued over amongst your little group. Fair enough?"

"Hardly. But I need you, so I accept your terms."

"Excellent. I will be in touch. Have my team assembled and ready to go in two days."

"But—"

"I will speak to you then. Good night."

He climbed back into the truck and I watched as he left, his tail lights disappearing into the night. I wondered if I had done the right thing. Had I handed matters over to a competent professional or signed my teams' lives over to a power-grabbing monster. Only time would tell. I would have to wait and trust for a little while. In the end, win or lose, I would still be here. Here with Sally.

The Homeless Man

I ask not!
to love or to let me be loved;
for God loves me and is my love.
I ask not!
for daily food;
for man has the ability to give but will not.
I have nothing
I need nothing
I ask for nothing except;
Only...
for the songs of angels
and the remembrance of my courage.

-- Tim Croissette

-- Jen Ward

B-Flat Scales
(to my incomplete.)

I can smell my vagina
inside his mouth, taste me on
his tongue softly, thinking
that I could love again, if I desired
(if I tried) somehow dull my senses
tone down the past pain and let the music
play loud in the background.

The piano sears our sounds, my fingers
collide with his soft breath. As my vagina
smooths over his thin lips I
blend in with the paint on the canvas
erasing everything except my mouth and his. He
says my name in the rhythm of jazz, possessing me,
in low and high octaves,blowing the trumpet,
as he sweeps his face between my thighs.

Tongues intertwined, bound together,
thighs woven into a blanket
meshed together into a spin grind against
concrete feeling my almond knees against his
belly/ concentrating on the feeling
feeling I can love this again (if i allow) relax and
fade into the sounds of the scale in the background.

And then:

The music stops, the clarinet sleeps underneath
the silent humming of the saxophone/ it is over.

Evaporates like skim milk
in the Gobi desert/ no trace of calcium/ no trace of love.
Naked bodies against each other soon to be
reclothed. No lips touch for goodbye, no lips greet
the following sunrise &
the scent of my vagina, the salt,
disappears from his mouth.

-- Jackie Smith

GET YER RACIAL SLURS RIGHT!

-- Pearl Pham

excerpts from

Letters From Cleo

-- Sarah Litoff

Dear Zeb,

You ordered me to write as soon as, well, I had something to write. So here I am. College. Guess I don't sound so thrilled? I'm not sure what I expected - huge golden gates opening slowly, majestically to receive you into the land of limitless horizons and merriment. Oh, pardon me - that's death! College = death. Each ends a major phase of life (according to some), and opens a new, invariably more pleasurable and rewarding stage of existence.

The pearly gates opened for me onto complete chaos. I don't think God would've allowed this in his heaven. All and any lofty expectations you implanted in my mind were quickly and completely eradicated when we first caught sight of the cattle corral that is registration. I think the only other time I saw so much confusion and nervous excitement in one small enclosed space was the New York orientation before I left for France. And that PBS special we once saw about butchering livestock. Moo...moo.

Dad, in his usual way, decided it was too gruesome an affair to tackle on an empty stomach and a full car load (I really didn't take that much stuff. Honestly, Zeb. Not as much as you!), so we went to check out my dorm room.

It's a much larger room than I expected. One side had a nice, homey feel to it - bed all made and books neatly arranged on the shelf. The other side looked like a prison cell awaiting its newest jail rat. White concrete walls and furniture that seemed to have been attacked by large, ferocious animals. At least the mattress was clean. Until we unloaded the contents of the car on it. I suddenly realized that I didn't have a bed at all, but a cot, and not only did my roommate take the real bed, but she got the window, too.

Quite frankly, the first few days I didn't have much time to consider my newest monument in life. I was too busy trying to figure out why we needed so many papers and where the hell the dining hall was. Was it just me, or did every damn building look alike?

Registration and unpacking took about 5 seconds and suddenly it was time for Dad to his leave and me to...begin. Christ, you'd think I'd be easier with long term separation, what with that year in France. But, and I'm ashamed to say, I still cried myself to sleep that night. Yes, that's right, Zeb! Make fun of me all you want! Because you're over there and I'm here. Ha.

I can feel the semester stretching before me like an empty field. It's almost like a giant white...canvas, and I'm about to dip my brush in the paint and make my mark. (I hope.) What's scary is there are no back seat drivers - painters, rather - to guide my brush. If I dribble, let's say it's my own damn fault. Kind of scary, you know, to be a string-less marionette. You wish for it and you wish for it, but when you finally realize that the only one you can rely on is yourself, abruptly you want someone - anyone - to grab hold of the wheel. In other words, dearest brother, I WANT MY DAD! AND MY MOM! Even you would be o.k. Maybe. If I were desperate...just joking.

I'll write again soon. If you're lucky.

Oh, by the way - how are you?

Love, yours in a strange land,
Cleo

Dearest, darling Zeb,

Ew...did I really write that? I know I just wrote you (and I hope you're happy that you're going to cost me a fortune in foreign stamps), but I just cannot tear myself from you. (Subtle sarcasm). That, and I have more to relate. College is just a surprise a minute, you know.

I will not be sappy or gushing, I swear to you. My roommate, Abigail, is an extremely pleasant companion. She is considerate and...aw, hell...she's great! Fantastic! Heaven-sent! (Whoa, rein it in a bit, Cleo dear.) Truthfully, it is amazing how well we co-habit. Although... Although Abigail is a wonderful roommate, I am still wistful. Wistful and yearning for those exotic creatures known as MEN.

Ha! ha! You're trapped like a helpless bug in the sticky web of yet another gripe session. Don't you feel honored? I have chosen you to moan and complain about the lack of affections from the opposite sex (but thank God none from the same). I must ask you in straightforward honesty and simple inquisitiveness: am I a mutant? I like to think I 'm a decent-looking girl. Average, actually. Except for my strange taupe hair and violet eyes. And the nose. Remember, Zeb, the next time you suggest rhinoplasty to me, that you have the same nose. Only bigger.) I have a pleasant enough personality, once you get to know me. So what's the deal? Huh?!!

I am once again feeling unduly unappreciated by those creatures of your gender. Spare me your empty words of criticism. I shall sit casually upon my bed, pulling the heads off flies while I await Prince Charming (or a reasonable

facsimile thereof - possibly a frat boy), to gallop on a white steed (white Rollerblades) to my tower (2nd floor dorm room) and rescue me so we may reside in tax-free bliss the remaining years of our lives (or at the very least, take me to a mall. Your sister the mall-rat in all her overbite glory has not been inside one for an entire month. Save me from isolated hell. Damn this small college.)

Now that I've drowned in my own mucky puddle of insecurity and despair, I shall continue. AND NOW BACK TO OUR FEATURED PRESENTATION

I'm sure you're acquainted with the concept of doppelganger. If not, you suck. The doppelganger is supposedly your mirror image or soul mate. Soul mate is slightly tacky, like auras and reading tea leaves, but it expresses neatly enough the camaraderie between Abigail and me. I shan't bury you in any more sap. I think you get the picture.

Goodness, I have that pesky thing called class now.

Hope you're having fun in...where are you again?

Love back at the ranch,
Cleo

Hey Zebbie,

I was so rudely interrupted in my last letter, I didn't get to the point. Plus, I was carried away by the overpowering tide of anxiety. So, yes, I am writing AGAIN. Never say you have nothing to do because I expect you read all my letters AT LEAST five times and summarize them.

I worry people get the wrong impression of me. (That I'm sane...Ha.) I'd like to reassure them that it takes time and persistence to uncover my true self. I think people give up because they feel I'm too standoffish and cold, and the prize is not worth the effort. I'm well aware of this icy force-field that surrounds me and the need to chip away at it. I wish I could I help them get through, but it is just so difficult for me to immediately befriend someone and share all my innermost secrets.

There really is someone lurking inside! Abigail has received the first thin rays of warmth I'm able to project. They are out of necessity, for I'm forced to move quicker with her, because after all, I live with her.

I prefer to keep everyone at a manageable distance because my own company is the one I infinitely favor.

However, considering all that, I do have several friends. There's Evangeline and Camille and Anya and Alicia and what attracts people with uncommon names to me? We call Evangeline Vange, but I try to avoid saying her name because I have such a problem pronouncing v's. I spend most of my time, aside from Abigail, with Anya. Or Anya and Abigail together. I'm in awe of Anya. She's tall and willowy with long, thick black hair and cold gray eyes fringed with lush black eyelashes. You'd be attracted to her. If I were a guy, I'd go for her in a second. So I'm puzzled as to why she doesn't date. Perhaps because the guys are as intimidated as the rest of us? She gives off an aura of supreme self control and coolness, but in actuality, she has an almost perverse sense of humor and is very down-to-earth. Her realism is in direct contrast to her otherworldly appearance. She and I enjoy the same type of music - in fact, that's how we met. I was in the mail room signing for some CDs I had ordered, when she, waiting to pick up a package as well, caught sight of the titles.

"That's amazing," she said, her eyebrows jumping. (I later learned that was her trademark expression of surprise. Her entire face will not change, but her eyebrows will leap into her hairline.) "No other girl I've ever met has liked White Zombie." She tapped the CD and smiled slightly. I remember feeling skeptical because the smile didn't reflect in her eyes. But that's just Anya. I'm devoting so much of this letter to her because she is very intriguing. I am drawn to people who are not what they appear to be. I myself may fit in this category.

Vange is the exact opposite of Anya. Imagine a little rubber ball bouncing in perpetual motion. While Anya is subtly perverse, and only to those she chooses to reveal her sense of humor, Vange is openly and hilariously sexual. There are no holds barred and everyone is fair game. It's like skeet shooting - she tosses you up and shoots you down.

While Anya is subtly perverse, and only to those she chooses to reveal her sense of humor, Vange is openly and hilariously sexual. There are no holds barred and everyone is fair game. It's like skeet shooting – she tosses you up and shoots you down.

Camille and Alicia are a package deal in that they are very close and share a majority of the same interests. I believe they are as intimidated by my "closed door" quality as I am of Anya's preternatural beauty. I am on equal footing with either one, meaning I don't prefer one to the other. I am only just getting to know them, so my analysis is rather skimpy. The six of us (including Abigail) together are a spectacle to behold.

In short, I have discovered a very pleasur-

able niche of friends, except the complete absence of male friends. It's nothing extremely shocking - you know I have never had many male friends. Actually, I have never had any. But according to every "reliable" source, the youngest daughter of 3 older brothers ought to have a special camaraderie with the opposite sex. Yes, and where is my camaraderie? Anya and I are considering maybe kidnapping some guy and well...never mind (that's too kinky for you).

Oh, sorry, Zeb, I am once again traipsing in the desolate Land of Desperation. Anya accompanies me every so often.

I have divided the stages of life into public school as the Age of Parents and college as the Age of Friends. Your parents control your life until college, and then your friends take the helm. Heaven help me if they ever discover I seek refuge in the library to study.

I'm only here to get drunk, get high, and have sex. Unfortunately, I've had no opportunity to do any of the three. Guess Dad's wasting his money.

Abigail is proceeding to wrench my left arm from its socket, which I find rather upsetting due to the fact that I may need that arm some time in the near future. I suppose this is some secret code to tell me Anya and she are ready to go to dinner.
The mother ship is calling me.
Love,
Cleo

Zeb,

Just a short note to tell you I am alive, hale, and hearty. Gracious me, I haven't written you for two weeks. You must be despondent. My classes are going well, Camille is taking us all to dinner this weekend, and I am going to a party on Saturday. No deep philosophical ponderings this time. I'm enjoying myself immensely. The stringless marionette approves of her masterless existence.
-Cleo

Master Zebulon Latham,

Thank you ever so much for the questionnaire you sent me. Are you implying I am not telling you what you want to know? And so you expect me to just lay aside all my much more important work to answer your silly questions? However, because of my unequivocal fear of you, I shall. (But let's see you try to hop on a plane to carry out your threats. Because you continue in failing to realize that I'm here and you're WAY OVER THERE!)

1. Anya is shaking her head in an apparently positive manner...no, she is merely attempting to swing her hair over her shoulder without the use of her hands. I'm sorry to report that you will die alone, or at least not in Anya's company. Go find a native chick, you horny bastard.

2. Abigail does possess at least one fault. She drips all over the floor after her shower and then I step in the minuscule puddles which get a whole hell of a lot bigger when they permeate my sock. And her computer talks to itself when it thinks it's alone. (So do I .) And her family is on Sri Lankan time or something when they call at 7:00 in the morning. And then there's the drugs, drinking, and wild oily orgies...of course, I'm just miffed because I'm not getting any. Are you still there?

3. No, Dad does not send a check to my friends each month. Smart ass.

4. I am concerned with my lack of male friends because I feel I am missing something by not having any. The different perspective they bring to a friendship seems to be extremely fulfilling. According to magazine articles and my friends. My problem is not only am I more comfortable with other females, but I view every guy as a potential mate, unless I am not physically attracted to him.

Having said all that, I do have a few male friends now, due to the fact that I was placed in an all male group to do an oral presentation in my genetics class. We discovered mutual musical and movie tastes and we now occasionally hang out - watch videos, etc. They took me to a movie last week.

One of these newfound friends, Geoff, is in lust with Camille and he has declared it my duty to bring them together. He overlooks the fact that I have the subtlety of a rhinoceros in the field of romance. I have patiently explained to him the only tactical strategy I know is Cleo's Direct Approach to Romance. The subject tackles the object of desire, throws he/she/it upon the ground and proceeds to do what they will. This only works if the subject is much stronger than their target, but there is always the element of surprise (immense surprise) and I believe lust provides adrenaline. Geoff vows to try it if I promise to post bail for him. But I digress, like usual.

5. Classes? What are those? You think I'm attending college to LEARN? Ha! I hate encouraging my intellectual enlightenment. I'm only here to get drunk, get high, and have sex. Unfortunately, I've had no opportunity to do any of the three. Guess Dad's wasting his money.

Of course, I attend classes. I haven't missed one yet. I'm taking bio, British history, genetics and its social implications, and French lit. There really is not much to say about them, though I've found that no matter how much I enjoyed a subject personally, anything loses its appeal when there are papers

involved. Case in point: British history. I'm doing well in them all, but I resent the fact that a professor of science is correcting my writing style and skills. We write quite a few papers in my genetics class. French lit - what am I thinking? I despise poetry, much less 18th century French poetry.

6. I am majoring in French. I realize it is a completely useless major, but I must respectfully ask you, were your mathematics and philosophy any less futile? So there.

7. I told you I didn't know Camille and Alicia very well. They are, as far as I know, three dimensional. No, they were not hatched from the same egg. Yes, they are both attractive girls. No, neither one will sleep with you. How do propose to accomplish that, anyway? By mail? What is this need to sleep with my friends, anyway? If you're really desperate, go buy a goat. (A live one, you idiot.)

They are determined and vivacious and spunky and direct. I always enjoy my times with them.

8. Oh, that's it. Fini. If you have any more questions, kindly direct them to your...

The voices are telling me to close this letter,

Cleo

Dear Zeb,

Hey, what's up? How are you? I'm fine, thank you. I'm glad to hear you are enjoying yourself as well.

AAGH! I CAN'T BE CASUAL ANY LONGER! I THINK I'M GOING TO EXPLODE!

I mean someone! I mean someone! I mean someone! I mean someone! I mean someone!

Not just any someone - a special someone. Oh no, I'm incoherent. Simple language skills are eluding me. Animal passion is reducing my brain to mush. Will this exquisitely painful horror never end? I need to be sedated. No! I need my Adam fix.

All right. You are thoroughly confused and no doubt disgusted that your little sister has suddenly lost all reason and transformed into some sort of foolish twittering little bird. To like and be liked in turn - it's exhilarating. It's amazing. It's exciting. I think I'm going to throw up. Abigail has retreated to the lounge in a futile attempt to reestablish mental stability. Hee, hee - insanity is contagious.

To start at the beginning: lately, I've been playing around on the computer, specifically the college's cyberchat forums. I'm generally much more direct and bold while talking to people online (because there is no need to worry about what you look like, whether they like what you look like, whether something incredibly stupid just slipped out of your mouth and was absorbed aurally before you can grab it out of the air and make it vanish, and whether you have a large chunk of dinner attached to your face).

I struck up a conversation with someone who called himself Hades and frankly, I forget what we talked about. But it must've been good because he continued to "call" me up. We had the same taste in music. Music works wonders.

So we're chatting for about a week and then he invites me over to an impromptu party at his dorm. I had no idea who this guy is. I wouldn't've known him from Adam. (Oh, yeah, he IS Adam. Silly me.) I forced Abigail and Camille to accompany me. I may be a flake, but I know relatively enough not to go alone to meet some strange male.

I shook his hand, for Christ's sake, when I introduced myself. You would've died laughing.

Want to hear something scary, Zebbie? He looks like you. What kind of pseudo-Freudian theory can you provide? No, I do not harbor such feelings for you. One, you're my brother and two, you're Zeb. And three, you're too much like me. Three strikes and you're OUT. Besides, he's much better looking.

Yes, I realize it is pathetic to meet someone over the computer. But when you're desperate...

It turned out great. I like him, he likes me...what could be better? What can be better than to know that finally, there is at least ONE person out there, in the Great Wide Open who finds you attractive and enjoys your company?

Speak of the devil and the devil appears...

Hi Zeb - Adam

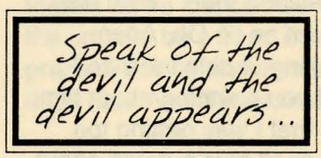
Love, yours from hell,

Cleo

Zeb,

I must apologize for my earlier whirlwind of a letter. I honestly could not think clearly. I still can't concentrate. I am in a state of disbelief that after those many years of complaining and whining and despair, I finally have someone. Is it truly possible that I, Cleo Rosemarie Latham, am dating? Mind-boggling.

WELCOME TO ANOTHER EDITION OF RIPLEY'S BELIEVE OR NOT



I am almost detached from myself, a spectator to each momentous event. Because I feel as though I am watching everything from the sidelines, I'm afraid it is expressed as coldness. In fact, is it impartiality or my own innate unemotionality? There are three layers to Cleo's being:

Top layer: shyness, timidity, quietness (seen as standoffish and cold)

Middle layer: warmth, sympathy, humor, almost excessive "niceness," friendliness
Bottom layer: unemotionality, arrogance, unconcern, complete indifference

I know, it seems improbable my inner being is so completely different, but I'm sure it's true. I can feel, at times, the bottom layer sending little thorny stalks of impatience and insensitivity through the rich brown earth of the sympathy in the middle layer. No matter how long I've known a person, they've never experienced the full effect of the bottom layer, except perhaps on a few occasions, because I carefully suppress it. It's not pleasant, you know. And I try to be as pleasant as I can.

I'm getting off track with this self analysis, though. I'm trying to explain that because this is such a radically different situation for me, my entire being is thrown into an uproar, and I'm trying to level out, like a car on an incline, by letting my inner core take control. Or else I'm unable to feel anything deeper than initial excitement?

He took me to the cemetery last night. It was a velvety black night studded with white crystal stars. Not too cold, yet chilly enough for me to seek warmth under his coat and have a valid reason to wrap my arms around him. As if I needed a reason? But I felt I did, because I am awkward and insecure initiating blatant affection. I am very uncertain of myself; I prefer to let him blaze the trail, and I tag along behind.

Here's Pure Romance for you: I had my first French kiss sitting on a gravestone. The stuff of fantasies, isn't it? Sounds like some kinky necrophilic wish. Hell, it worked for me.

He was in complete disbelief that I have never dated, much less kissed anyone. Granted, it's sad and depressing, but not so alarming. There are others (AREN'T THERE?) in the same boat as I. I was mildly puzzled by his incredulity, but I suppose if I take it in the right spirit, it could be quite flattering.
Love yours on Cloud...oh, 7,
Cleo

Dearest Zeb,

I am not that arrogant. Of course I think all you care to know is how I feel and think. Who else could possibly be as important as I? Oh, Adam. He's only secondary. I'm joking. I didn't realize I hadn't described him or told you anything about him. Well, since you complained that I was getting too deep for you and you really don't give a damn about how I perceive my inner workings and I was causing you immense headaches and all you really want to know is details about my sex life (dream on, friend), I'll be so superficial you'll be begging for some Kunderian treatise.
I am getting really tired of your questionnaires.
1. What if I refuse to answer them?
2. What's the deal with the recycled paper? Your little sis isn't good enough for clean white paper? Is this how you feel about me? (Note: 3 questions.)
3. Look, isn't your goat enough? Anya wouldn't marry you even if you were on the same planet as she. (Oops, statement. Your serve.)

O.K, I'll answer your questions. Since you don't want my beautiful prose, my works-of-art-masquerading-as-letters anymore, it's easier for everyone if I just punch 'em out.

To make it especially simpler for you, here's the:

Boyfriend Playing Card
Name: Adam Neil Currey
Age: 19
Hair: Brown
Eyes: Green
Vital Statistics: 6'2"; 165 lbs.
Hobbies: skiing, dancing, REALLY loud music, computers, etc, etc.

He has a strange sense of humor, like my own. Strange is generic, isn't it? But no deep thoughts, right? So never mind. (Ha. You asked for it.)

He's led an interesting, eventful, action packed, look-for-it-on-a-cereal-box life. Well, his father has, anyway. But it's all genetic. Frankly, he's hard to describe. He's one of those people who have an entire concept behind them. Like you. Zebulon James Latham.
Love yours from the first dimension,
Cleo

Dear Zeb,

I'm glad you're glad that I'm happy. Frankly, I may be as happy now as I have ever been. My classes are going pretty well, despite the fact I spend most of my time with Adam, and when I'm not with him, I'm thinking about him. Ew, how sappy.

We're both nocturnal. My ideal would be to sleep all day and be up at night. I get to bed at an average of 3:00, despite my good intentions, but I take naps. Naps are the saving grace of the college student.

I am still amazed that I am dating. I find it just incredible, bewildering so.

But I still have my reason: he invited me to a concert last weekend, in which it would be necessary to stay at his house. However much I would love to, I politely declined. After all, we'd only known each other a week or so. No way would I be caught alone at his house. You never know. (Ooh - can you feel the suspicion?) Abigail was very proud of me for showing willpower. As if I have any. O.K, a little. He

was much disappointed - too bad.

Well, I'll tell you right off - I'm not in love with him, nor am I falling in love with him. I'm only 18, and cynical though it may sound, I really don't believe people can fall in love so young. We have no life experience, or much other experience, for that matter. How can we possibly know what it feels - what it is - to be in love? If Adam or anyone were to confess to me at some point, "I love you," I think I'd laugh. Harsh, isn't it? Or maybe it's just me that cannot fall in love. I'm really having my doubts about my ability to feel deeply for people. Miss Ice Princess at your service. Or possibly I'm one of those cool people who take it all slow at the beginning but then get completely and utterly crushed when it's over.

Christ, am I negative. And cynical. You'd think this was some bitter 50 year-old writing this letter.

I'm afraid to deal with this like any other teenage girl. Afraid to be thought of as sappy and naive and lovelorn and puppy love. Yuck - my friends coo at me. I hate that. I hate fluffy pink cotton candy romance.

Give me leather and chains any day.

Yours from the House of Pain,
Mistress Cleo

Dear Zeb,

A rather startling development has occurred in the Cleo - Adam love saga.

"Let's just be friends," he tells me the other night. "I feel like I hardly know you, and we're rushing."

If he feels as though he hardly knows me, then he's certainly not the only one. Does he think he's special in that I will immediately reveal everything about myself because he's the only one to have kissed me? Granted, I almost wish I could be one of those people who instantaneously adopts someone as their closest confidante - in this case, anyway. But as you know, I can't. He asks me several times during the course of a night what I am thinking. To tell someone what is going through your mind is the greatest sacrifice. It opens your entire being so wide, you can never retrieve it.

(Besides, I'm usually pondering incredibly stupid things, or else I'm thinking about sex, which I cannot tell him!)

Truthfully, I dislike anyone asking me what I am thinking. It puts me on the spot - catches me off guard. If I'm thinking about them, of course I can't tell them. You always are completely honest in your mind, but people cannot handle the truth. They have a certain perception of themselves, and if your opinion conflicts with theirs, they find it very upsetting. I myself am not so offended by external judgment. While I suppose I would be hurt to learn if someone disliked me, I would not be extremely surprised. I am not always the most pleasant person, and I admit it. But I find it incredibly interesting to see how others perceive me.

But asking me what I am thinking about is a direct intrusion. It is a most unavoidable lancing of my force-field, and I don't like it. I feel stupid saying, "Oh, nothing much," but it is a great bluff.

So when Adam offers a penny for my thoughts, I feel like a caged animal, with my mind running frantically back and forth behind the bars, attempting to conceal the small treasure it has created.

Anyway, (what a useful word to get yourself back on track) I am not understanding this "let's-just-be-friends" deal. I mean, your expectations are high, your happiness is complete and with an innocent look and a sheepish grin, he jams a long, silver, pearl-tipped pin into your giddy hopes, leaving them to fall deflated to the earth. Pardon me, but I have plenty of friends, but I've never had a boyfriend.

My friends coo at me. I hate that. I hate fluffy pink cotton candy romance. Give me leather and chains any day.

Confusion. Puzzlement. They're my two best friends now. I dress them up, set them down in a row, and just admire them.

I suppose that after so many years of coquettish females smiling evilly as they pronounce these 4 demure words to their hapless mates, it is only fitting that I should hear these words now.

Of course, as with anything in life, it is not so clear cut as this...this demotion. He's saying we're friends as he kisses me. I don't know which part of the country he's from, but I don't make it a general practice to kiss my friends. For one, they'd probably deck me. And if they liked it, then I'd deck them.

scene 7 from

Portland II

-- Jeff Frank

Johnny Law: Boy?

Ken: Me?

JL: You see another boy here?

Ken: No.

JL: Boy?

Ken: Yes?

JL: You running away from home?

Ken: What makes you say that?

JL: You look a little young to be traveling alone.

Ken: I'm old enough.

JL: Boy?

Ken: The name is Ken.

JL: Where you going, boy?

Ken: Why do you want to know?

JL: Just curious. Wondering if you're going the same place I am is all.

Ken: Where are you going?

JL: Funeral.

Ken: Who died?

JL: Mother.

Ken: I'm terribly sorry, sir. Would you like to be left alone?

JL: Already have been.

Ken: Really, I could find another seat if you wanted to be alone.

JL: What're you gettin' at, boy?

Ken: Nothing... Where's the funeral?

JL: Portland.

Ken: I should have known.

JL: Why? You been there?

Ken: No, but that's where I'm going.

JL: What for? Ain't nothin' there for you.

Ken: My sister's there.

JL: So was my mother, and you didn't see me going there till now.

Ken: You didn't want to see your mother?

JL: I seen her before, I know what she looks like.

Ken: I've never seen my sister.

JL: Then you can't know what you're missing. As for me, I knew what I wasn't missing.

Ken: You've never been to Portland before?

JL: Oh, I've been there all right. Grew up there. Went to school there. Worked there. I had a chance to get out and I did. Never went back till now.

Ken: You didn't like it?

JL: Hated it. Portland's a God awful place. No place there for you. Bunch of crazy people. There's two things you gotta watch out for in Portland: crazy people and idiots. That's all that's there. You want a city with something to do, go to New York. All you're gonna find in Portland is crazy people and idiots.

Ken: I've been to New York. New York's nice, I like the city sometimes. But Portland has that feeling of anonymity. A lot of people don't really seem to know much about Portland. Everyone knows about New York.

JL: I tell you, boy. I worked as a cop for eight years in Portland, and for twice that long in New York, and New York is a much saner place, believe me.

Ken: Portland's more dangerous than New York?

JL: Not more dangerous. You can be shot at any time in New York. Working in New York, you gotta worry about your body gettin' killed. Portland, you gotta watch out for your mind gettin' killed.

Ken: What do you mean?

JL: Lot of weird stuff happens in Portland. Nothing violent, just strange.

Ken: Like what?

JL: That's where the artist worked.

Ken: What artist?

JL: THE artist. I'm the guy who finally caught up to him. Threw the fucker in jail.

Ken: Who was the artist?

JL: The artist was crazy. This was about seventeen years ago. I'd been on the force for four years, working robbery. There'd been a large number of really strange, random robberies. We figured it was a gang or something. We couldn't figure out why anyone would steal this shit.

Ken: What kind of shit?

JL: I don't know. Weird shit. Lots of it. Guy stole aluminum siding off one house, road signs off the highway, car tires, robbed a candy store, a load of two by fours. All sorts of weird shit. Little kids had their lunch boxes stolen on the way to school. The grocery store kept reporting missing grocery carts.

Ken: One guy stole all this stuff?

JL: One guy. It was random. It was completely random. How could I catch him? How did I know where he would strike next?

Ken: How did you catch him?

JL: I didn't get to him. He got to me. I was working late one night, pulled over to the side of the road to take a piss. Fucker came out of the bushes, stuck a gun to my head, and ripped my badge off my shirt.

Ken: But you got him?

JL: No. He got away. But a few days later, we got an anonymous call down at the station that my badge could be found in this old Victorian house at the top of this hill. So we went down to this house, and busted down the door, and ran in.

Ken: Was he there?

JL: We walked in the door, and then there was no house.

Ken: What do you mean?

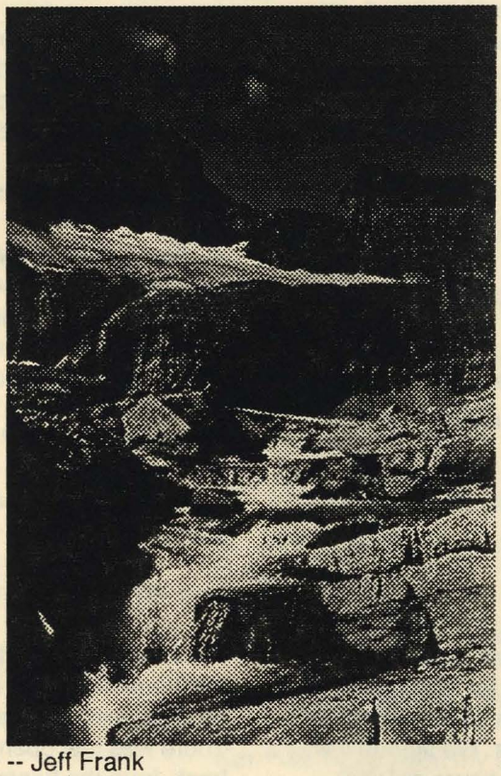
JL: The bastard had hollowed out the entire inside of this huge fucking house. There was no ceiling, and no floor, except for a little piece by the front door. There was just open space, from the front to the back, from the basement to the roof.

Ken: Just open space?

JL: No. A statue. The statue of fucking liberty. It was made out of everything. All that shit he stole was there. He made a statue of liberty out of things he ripped off. It was all there, right down to the last lunch box, right down to the last lollipop.

Ken: But he was gone?

JL: No. Here was there all right, swinging from a noose tied to Liberty's torch. Scariest fucking thing I've ever seen. I left Portland later that week and never went back. Portland is a place for sick fuckers like the artist. There's no place for you there, boy.



-- Jeff Frank

north carolina

it's fried fish sandwiches, greasy, bristling
with sharp little bones yearning
to slash my waiting gums wide.

it's life in the frying pan, watching surroundings
erode and gangs upon gangs of tiny gnats
out to prove they can jerk you around
better than their parents
did yesterday.

it's seeds sown deep, rains torrenting down so hard
i'm sure i'll never see another drop.....
but the land ain't yielding
and i'm sick of holding my breath in.

-- Raymond Cummings

See what makes it easy

Ear-jammed emotion
Barred black endless border.
Stroke your brush,
creating your master-place.

Marble bust burst!
I am your physical passion.
Body of lust,
to create lust.

So scratch razor moons,
Draw lines forming your ideal.
I gave you vast golden,
snaked with emotion.

-- Jessica Chester

-- Jeff Frank

When Silver Plate Breaks Harder than a Human Heart

She left her earrings by the bed for me to find,
cool metallic hoops, thin as her neck. And writing
on the wall -- literally, writing -- an original poem
in red crayon, with misspellings. *He's screwing*

a child, the thought made me smile. He noticed
and tried to catch my eye, confident it was
afterglow. His large thumb rubbed my temple
as his fingers traced the scallop of my ear,

and he leaned into me with a butterfly's kiss
to define tender. He didn't speak but tucked me
under his arm, slept with his face in my hair.
I stared at nothing until light began to feed through

the curtains, and I could catch her earrings vying
for my morning-after sun. I wanted to break them
evenly between two fingers. But it took both hands
and I thought, *I've won.* When I rolled over to drop

the four curving sticks of plate to the floor, the din
and clatter of the pieces in my chest was deafening.

-- Kelli Youngblood

The O'Neill Literary House at Washington College, Chestertown, MD 21620

Menagerie

3

Mangrove

Volume 3

Edited by

Chris Watkins,
Ray Cummings
&
Jackie Smith

Dedicated to Robert Day
& the Washington College English Department

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of the O'Neill Literary House
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n-n-talk-king up tombstones

"all this talk-k-kof-f
g-g-graves got me so damned *grim*

and gray-lorn 'bout my
heartscones," s-s-stammered
old Smith sobbing,
suffering f-f-from

the way the Doctor
refused to exhibit any
slight sympathy as another
maligined
patient began to die;

thick, obsidian cold-framing
a toneless, convex indifference.

-Raymond Cummings

us, Sleeping

In your bed I often end
up sleepless. Maybe

it's the still-unfamiliarity
of dozing body-part to body-

part, breath on neck, hand
on thigh. Too many covers
make a third party in bed,

braided jealously among us.

-Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

A hill overlooking Phoenix,

stars and stripes of red neon
lovers screaming for the check in a two-star
restaurant out on the strip, Treating
their lives like their Tarot cards;
afraid of wipe-off karma getting
in the way of making a buck
or finding a new way of making
a buck or their concentration
when looking at the bus schedule

that types out where you can find the better buck
or the cheaper fuck or whichever / vice versa
It's America. It's pot pouri.

-Stephen Spotswood

-Pearl Pham

Playing Princes

-Jennifer Ward

I got it in my head that I needed a vacation. It's not like I do anything extremely taxing, you know, I don't have a crummy 8-6 job, I don't have kids, I don't have a mortgage—I have no reason to need a vacation. I go to college, but I don't study that hard. 'Course, I don't party that much either. My mother says I'm anti-social. I guess that's true. I'm not terribly outgoing. And I've noticed that I meet fewer and fewer people I like right away. I mean, after five minutes of chit-chatting, you can pretty much tell if something's wrong with somebody.

Anyway, I was on spring break, and I decided I ought to take a vacation. It would have to be a just a day-long road trip, though, because I promised the girls I'd go into work for a few days during the week. (For the past two summers and some vacations, I've worked as a file clerk at Annapolis Security, near my house.) Anyway, I have this weird fascination for plants, so for my vacation I had my heart set on going to the National Arboretum, bringing a book, maybe. Mom didn't think that was a good idea, though. She never came out and said, "You can't go to the National Arboretum," but she did make an awfully convincing case against it.

"You're going to get yourself shot," she said.

I couldn't really argue with that. And I didn't want her to worry the whole day, so I took out my Maryland/D.C./Virginia/Delaware/Pennsylvania map and looked for another destination. I had the urge to cross a state line. Mom "expressed her concern" for my somewhat unreliable sixteen-year-old car; I decided to stay in state. When it's not a matter of life and death, sometimes it's best just to humor her.

She couldn't find fault with the beach, so I headed east, on whatever road seemed like it might lead to water. I sang almost the whole way.

I went through Deale, Md., which wasn't very exciting save for about ten thousand marinas. In North Beach, though, I found a public beach and pier. It was still early afternoon, and there weren't many people around. I parked next to a small, run-down store across the street from the beach. From the store blasted country music. I'm a sucker for local color, so I went inside, hoping to pick up some postcards.

The store may have been small and dilapidated, but it sure was complete. Packaged meat, detergent, pet food, canned vegetables, magazines—they even sold trail mix. I almost bought some to complement the "adventure" I was on, but I decided that would be too cheesy. On my way out I walked past a freezer stocked with ice creams I used to like when I was a kid: Nutty Buddies, Push Pops, Fudgcicles, Orange Cremes, Flavr-Ice, and—best of all—ice cream in a cup with a wooden spoon. I firmly believe that ice cream tastes better when eaten off wood.

On the beach, I sat against a wooden beam and started to read. One of my classes required we read a biography of a literary figure over the break; I was about halfway through a book about Antoine de Saint Exupéry. He's the guy who wrote my absolute favorite book, *The Little Prince*. I've read that book fourteen times. Unfortunately, I was less than halfway through my biography.
I was at a really great part, though, about how this French aviator survives seven days without food or shelter in the middle of the Andes mountains in a heavy snowstorm. The thing is, he just *walks* out of the Andes. The

storm forces his plane to crash-land, and he builds himself a snow fort for shelter. He can't lay down and die, though, because—get this—he remembers his insurance policy: Without a corpse, the company won't give his wife benefits for four years. He doesn't want his wife to be poor, so he starts walking. Talk about a prince! And he walks, it's still snowing, he's hungry, his feet are bleeding, and he keeps on walking. The guy just walks right out of the Andes. Everybody's really happy to see him when he gets back to the airfield; several pilots—including his good buddy Antoine—had been flying rescue airplanes trying to find him, but the snow had covered up his plane. His story made all the South American newspapers, and even inspired a Chilean folk song.

"Let's go play Sand Fight." After about thirty seconds of throwing sand at each other, Joey called a time-out.

Anyway, I guess I was pretty involved in my book because when I looked up, a small boy with brown hair was walking along a short wall behind me, hands behind back, nose in air, humming. Kids don't walk like that unless they're up to something. Then I heard a giggle from behind my wooden beam.

"Uh, he wants to ask you out," a blond-haired boy popped up, giggling. Then the brown-haired boy jumped off the wall and started chasing the blond one, both running off behind the pier. I returned to my book. Boys.

"Hey!"

I didn't look up.

"Hey! Heeeeeeeeeeey!"

I looked up. The blond boy peeked around a pier beam.

"Will you marry him?" The boy smiled. "Nah, I'm just playin'." He ran down to the shore and kicked sand into the waves. Then the brown-haired boy emerged from under the pier and walked over to me, looking at his shoes.

"Do you wanna play tag?" he said softly, now focused on my shoes. He had a trace of a Southern accent; his voice was small and raspy, as if he was learning the words as he said them.

"Nah, I'm not a very good runner," I said, "but thanks."

"Oh. Okay." He walked over to another beam of wood, closer to the shore. His friend joined him, boasting a toy car he'd found washed onto the shore.

"Ah! Look at this car!" he said to the brown-haired boy. With the proper sound effects, the boy drove the car through the air, over his arm, along the beam, and into his friend's shoe. Then he chucked the car into the water. "What's your name?" he said, not missing a beat.

"Jennifer."

The boys looked at each other, whispered, and ran off. A few moments later, the brown-haired boy returned.

"What're you doing?"

"Reading."

"Oh."

I felt bad for being so unresponsive, so I offered, "What's your name?"

Right on cue, the blond boy returned. "My name's Joey and he's Jeffrey," he blurted, as if to save his friend from conversation.

"How old are you?"

"Zero." He punched the brown-haired boy in the shoulder. "Nah, I'm ten and he's ten."

"Are you best friends?"

"Yeah, he's in my class," said Joey.

"Aren't you afraid of talking to strangers?"

"Nah. I like strangers." To Jeffrey he turned. "Let's go play Sand Fight." After about thirty seconds of throwing sand at each other, Joey called a time-out. Jeffrey and I watched, then, as Joey turned three somersaults and a cartwheel, ran down to

touch the water, threw a handful of pebbles at the pier, and walked the length of the wooden beam in front of me, arms stretched out like a gymnast. He looked oddly familiar; I turned to the picture section in my book. There was a sketch of the Little Prince that Saint ExupÈry had drawn for a friend of his. Joey looked oddly similar to the drawing. I mused on the likeness until the boy returned, shouting "Time-in!" and throwing dirt bombs at his friend.

The game grew old quickly, and soon the boys wandered over to me again. "Will you give him your phone number?"

Joey did not tire easily, I gathered. "What for?"

"He wants to ask you out."

I didn't respond; they conferred.

"Will you go out with me?" This was Jeffrey's voice, slowly reciting the words but hastily stringing them together. He was alone, Joey was behind the pier.

Remembering my bitter, romance-less high school days, however, I was not about to accommodate any boy so easily. "Where will we go?"

A short pause. "To the store."

"Talk louder!" demanded the pier.

"What will we do at the store?"

"Uh, get a drink."

This kid watches movies, I thought. "You got money?"

"Um." Jeffrey looked back at the pier. "No, but I got three dollahs at home. I'll be right back."

"No, wait a sec. I've got money." I was charmed by my small Don Juan. "There's ice cream in the supermarket over there. Wanna get some?" Such a proposition is perhaps a ten-year-old's dream come true: a beautiful older woman who not only agrees to go out, but also picks up the tab. Not bad.

So I was approached—but not shot—by strangers on my vacation to North Beach. Then I decided to take my accosters out for ice cream. Wait 'til my mother gets a load of this.

In the store, Joey climbed into the ice cream freezer. I knew I drew some attention as a tourist in a small town; Joey's acrobatics didn't help me to blend in. And as I expected, Joey picked up almost every kind of treat before deciding on a blue Flavr-Ice, a long, thin plastic pouch of frozen sugar water. Jeffrey and I chose ours more judiciously. I wanted something I could eat with a wooden spoon; he suggested vanilla for me, selecting an ice cream sandwich for himself.

The three totaled $1.37. Joey asked the cashier for a pair of scissors to open his Flavr-Ice, but she didn't have any. This was not a problem. On the way out of the store Joey whipped out his pocket knife, sat down on the mat directly in front of the doors underneath the 25¢ toy vending machines, and proceeded to saw open the tube.

"Ah! Didn't even cut myself!" He got up and walked through the doors—held open by the small crowd who had been blocked by his "work" in the entrance. "Okay, well, we'll see you later," he said.

"Wait a minute. I just bought you ice cream. You're gunna run off and ditch me?" I tried to sound Southern and in distress.

Joey grunted, sucking on his blue icicle, but Jeffrey began to follow me across the street back to the beach. "What grade are you in?" I asked in an attempt to keep his interest.

"Fifth." A ring of chocolate from the ice cream sandwich lined his lips.

"Do you like your teacher?"

"Yes."

"What are you learning about?"

"The brain."

"That's neat! What about the brain?"

"It sends messages."

"Yeah, it sends messages to your whole body," said Joey, catching up with us as we walked past the pier. While there was a 'No Trespassing' sign in front of the pier, there was also a body-sized gap in the pier blockade. When he saw a couple walking on it, he demanded, "If they can do it, so can we!"

I didn't follow as he ran towards the

pier. It's not that I had anything against piers. I like piers. But when somebody tells me not to do something, it's generally for a reason. I remembered how I didn't go to the National Arboretum because my mother was afraid I'd get shot. I could drown if I went on a pier that was unsafe.

"Wanna come?" He stood on the pier triumphantly, mouth entirely blue, blond hair tossing in the wind.

I followed him, Jeffrey beside me.

"Did you know that your haht has four holes in it?" The tone of Jeffrey's question made check my shirt to see if I spilled ice cream on it. "Two go to your lungs, one goes to your stomach, and the other one gets to your brain," he recited.

I said I didn't know that. We walked along the pier together, slowly. Ahead, Joey turned around and called to us.

"Last one there's a rotten egg!" He trotted a few steps.

Jeffrey and I continued at our pace.

"Don't you wanna play that?"

"Did you know that your lahge intestine absorbs stuff?" Successfully ignoring his friend, Jeffrey continued my lesson in human physiology.

I said I'd heard that, but was impressed that he knew it.

"Will you be here for the fireworks?"

"When are those?"

"Uh, around the Fourth of July. In July."

I said I probably wouldn't be, I lived in Annapolis and they have fireworks there, too.

"Do you have a family?"

"Yep!" I offered cheerfully. "I have a mom, a dad, and a sister."

"No," he paused, "Not that kind of family."

"What kind?"

"The kind, you know, like with a husband."

I said I didn't have that kind.

At the end of the pier, Joey pointed out the "bird shit" covering the benches. The boys stood on the benches while I leaned on the railing next to them. Jeffrey showed me the island from which they launch the fireworks every summer.

"Wanna know where else we can go?" Joey walked in front of us as we headed back towards the beach. Neither Jeffrey or I answered, though. Instead we were focused on the little black jeans which were slowly winding their way down his little white legs. Small green boxer shorts were exposed to the March air. Smiling, I covered my eyes with my hand and walked past as Jeffrey fell behind to help his struggling friend.

"Sorry," Joey grinned when he was once again dressed. "Wanna know where else we can go?" Like the Little Prince, he never forgot a question once he had asked it. He suggested we head towards a small pool surrounded by rocks and a fence to the left of the pier. A white pipe drained into the pool. "That's where they hatch baby crabs."

Jeffrey was not as easily impressed as I was. "That's where it goes when you flush the tollet," he said quietly.

Having finished our ice cream, we walked along the shoreline, beach combing. I found green, blue, and clear beach glass and a crab claw. I also found two kinds of green seaweed. One type I was able to identify as Ulva, or sea lettuce, having learned about it in my Chesapeake Bay class. The other had long, thin blades, but I didn't know its name. My most prized find, though, was a bivalve shell with a hole in the middle of it. In class we learned that such holes are from gastropods with radulas. Gastropods are "belly-footed" invertebrate arthropods like snails and slugs. Some have radulas, or really sharp tongues. Say you've got a mussel or a clam, and a sea snail climbs onto it and starts scraping the shell with its tongue. Eventually this drills a little hole in the shell, through which the snail sucks the animal out and eats it. Betcha had no idea snails were so violent.

Snails in the National Arboretum are, perhaps, particularly menacing.

Another neat thing about snails is that their anus is located on the back of their neck. The boys were most impressed with this last fact.

After an interpretative performance of a snail and its anus, Joey asked me again, "What's your name?"

"Jennifer."

"Spell it."

"J-E-N-N-I—"

"No! Spell it!"

"I-T."

"Oh man!" Joey turned and ran. I sat down on the edge of the pier, and he returned to give me an acrobatic show of cartwheels, handstands, somersaults, and flips. After every third feat or so, he'd call, "Now let me show you what I meant to do."

Jeffrey had disappeared, but Joey more than compensated for his absence in his attempt to keep me entertained. "What time is it?" he called while standing on his head.

"3:06," I checked my watch.

"No! It's time to get a watch!" He laughed hysterically. "What time is it?"

"Time to get a watch," I replied, looking around for Jeffrey.

"Oh man!" Joey tried again. "Do you know any jokes?"

"Not any good ones." Actually I do know one joke that really cracks me up. It goes, what do you get when you cross an insomniac, an agnostic, and a dyslexic? The punchline is, a person who stays up all night wondering if there is a dog. I didn't tell him the joke, though, first because I'm a lousy joke teller, and second because I didn't think he knew what an insomniac, an agnostic, and a dyslexic were.

"Well I got one. What do you call a pig who knows karate?"

"I don't know. What." Where was Jeffrey?

"Pork chop. Ha ha! Get it? Pork chop! Hey—what time is it?"

"Time to get a watch."

"Oh man!" Joey began to run his laps from the shore to the street, street to shore.

After a couple of laps, Jeffrey appeared and sat down next to me. "This is for you," he said, offering me a small plastic egg-shaped container.

Inside was a ring with a pink and purple yin-yang triangle. I thanked him and put it on my left middle finger.

He said I could keep it. A real prince.

Two older boys, about fifteen, drove past on bikes. One turned and glared at the jogging Joey. "There they go, acting they're all that," he retaliated, though the boys were by then out of ear-shot. "I could kick them in the nuts for acting like all that. Hey—what time is it?"

"Time to get a watch."

"What time is it?" Jeffrey asked, urgently but still softly.

"3:15" I checked again.

"Oh, man. He's got to go," said Joey, taking charge of the situation and walking over to his friend. "He's supposed to be home by 3. His dad's gonna fry him."

There wasn't any sappy goodbye, no longing looks, no promised future rendezvous. It was very anti-climatic, actually. I was probably more affected than they were. (Which isn't too hard to believe because I'm quite emotional, really. You know the Budweiser commercials they show around Christmas with the family coming home for the holiday in the jingle bell sleigh and the opera music in the background? Chokes me up every time.) Or maybe the threat of his father was enough to make him hurry home without looking back.

They walked up the street, and I watched them, my two princes. In five years or so, they'll probably prefer to call themselves Jeff and Joe. And that will be fine; after all, Mme. de Saint Exupéry knew her husband as Tonio.

A Leaf Falls
or
"In Dreams Begin Responsibilities"*

It's been a while since
she flung herself (hoping
For something better)

Down. Trusting flight
would save her and
It did until she hit

The ground. Take heed:
she is fragile. She crinkles
With a touch, crumples

At a breath. If you're
very quiet, you can hear her
Scrape along the pavement

As she searches
For the something better.

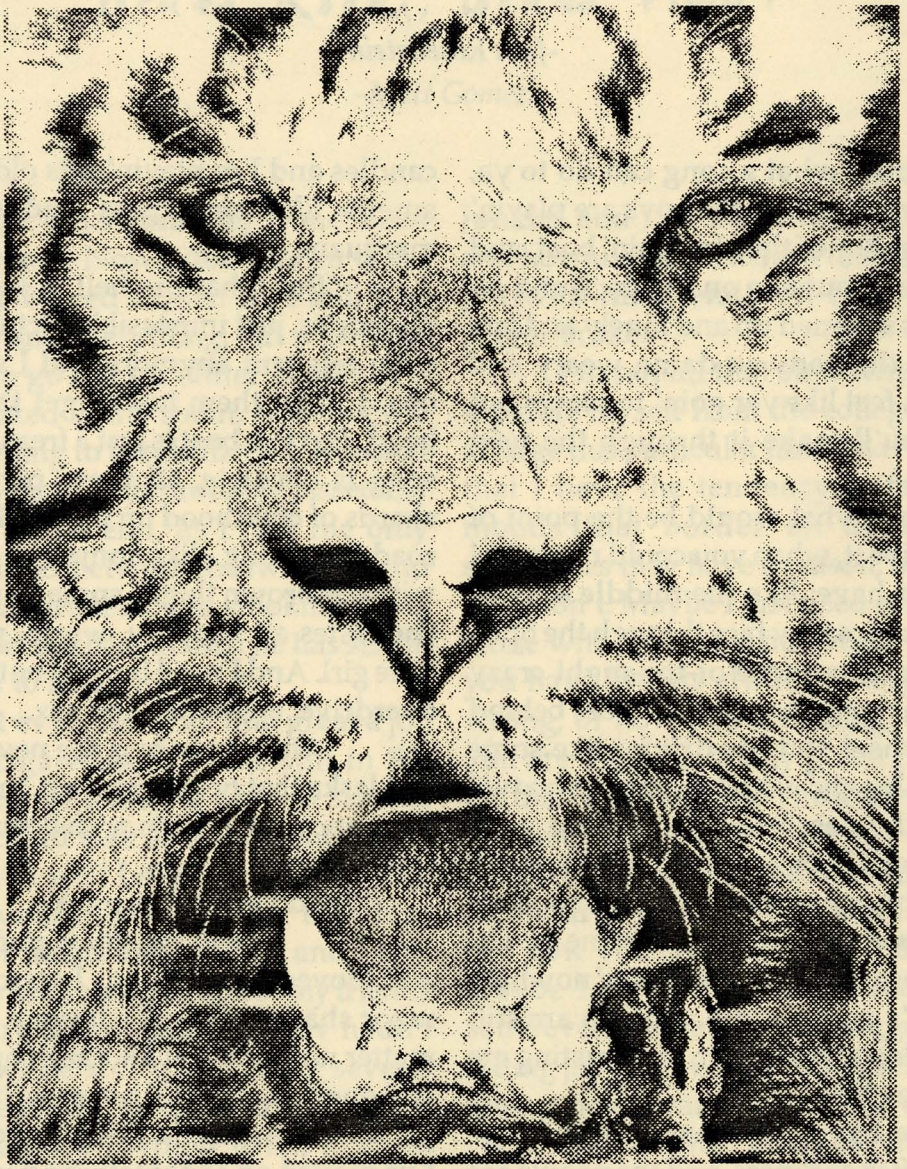
* title of a short story and collection by Delmore Schwartz

-Eva Kaplan-Leiserson

question

Ask any small child if shadows
have weight,
and they will think of the hole
that a glowing plug-in Superman
burned in the night and of the dark
folds that it couldn't quite reach,
and they will say "yes."

-Stephen Spotswood



-Claire Pitt

Dramatic Monologue

-Josh Rosenstein

"It's funny what a song can do to ya, when it's slow blues, and the boys are playin' spades in the galley of the old fishin' boat, and the rain is falling outside on the deck and on the sea and it's steamed up and lonely and late at night with the body so damn weary and achin', and ya feel like yer goin' to pieces but you know you'll make it through the next day...

"Aw, but what would be the point of tryin' to describe it, when you could never feel it if you never have: like the middle eastern wind blowin' across my face through the open window on some middle-of-the-night crazy drive with you layin' across my knees behind the steerin' wheel and me drivin' like some kind of Israeli lunatic; takin' the curves on two wheels, and the deserted intersections with the lights clangin' back and forth and back and forth but all the people are safe at home, part of their little lives and only you and me are cut off and cut loose and wild and going nowhere and this song's on the radio and you are still innocent, all sleepy and warm and trusting me to get us somewhere...

"Or the Egyptian Sinai on a summer evening just after darkness, and the people are all sitting beneath the Bedouin tent and there are candles in plastic bottles running out to the sea, like tiny soldiers, the only remnants of civilization in some vast endless desert dark[still]ness, and the dry desert wind blows rustling the straw huts, and tryin' to kill the candles and I'm playin' this old guitar and it smells like emptiness and summer and marijuana...

"But what the hell, it's all words and memories, just impossible pictures that aren't even relevant anymore and I wish to God I could paint them just to get them outta my head. But this boat is just a freakshow and this song is obsolete, all these pictures are just shards of childhood on this funked-out hyper road I'm riding...like some sweet Eskimo girl with her brown thighs spread open to me and she tastes all slippery, warm, private, like a little girl. And I'm all burned out on excess and overdrive, cigarettes and sex...

"And out here is the never-never land of Alaska that never grew up, the swastikas of ignorance still collide with beauty and purity so awesome...

and violence is pure
and cruelty is pure.

and I loved you for your hypocrisy and your razor sharp little girl's tongue but it doesn't matter now, it's just another Tom Waits song, and another story I'll never write. Because by the time I've seen the full picture for what it is, I've moved on to something new, and I don't care enough...but hell, ya can't paint pictures with words,

and it doesn't really matter much, you would've had to be there to understand at all."

excerpt from

Locked Room, Locked Heart

-Matt Gomez

For three days running, I had been locked in my room. Now I don't mean that I had physically barred myself in, I still had classes to go to and everything, but whenever I didn't have to go out for either classes or a meal, I was locked in my room, smoking my cigarettes, listening to bands like Joy Division and Sisters of Mercy. This probably pissed my roommate off to no end, as I had the only working CD player between the two of us and they were his cigarettes I was smoking. Hell, he shouldn't feel too bad, at least he has sex on a regular basis to make up for it.

I wasn't even doing all that great a job smoking the cigarettes as I was still in the awkward phase of learning how to smoke. Who knew it could take so much time just to learn a vice? Ah well I digress. Like I said, I had locked myself in my room for two days now except for meals and classes, and I was starting to miss meals too. Several of my friends started to worry about me when they hadn't seen me in a while and tried calling several times. They generally gave up after the fifth try. I know because I would listen to them leave messages on the answering machine asking if everything was okay and if I was feeling all right or if I had caught the virus that was going around the campus. When my roommate asked me why I had never answered the phone I told him I had been sleeping and had turned the ringer off of the phone in my room. One of the few benefits of living in the dorm that I did was that though they were triples, they were divided up into two rooms, and I only had one other roommate. As a result we each got the privacy that we wanted. I could listen to my Ramones and Cowboy Junkies and Led Zeppelin and Joy Division and he could listen to his Phish and smoke his pot with his friends. At least until his CD player broke.

I'm not all that sure why I decided to separate myself from the college community at large this particular time. I have long known that I have the tendency to fall into black moods that border on depression, and sometimes they have a reason, but sometimes they don't. Maybe I just need some time to be alone with my thoughts which is hard when you have friends always asking you what is wrong, or how you are doing, or even what you are thinking at any given point. Most of the time they really don't want the answer, but are just being polite. Best way to deal with people like that ask them if they have about a half hour so you can give them the abstract on just how you are doing. But I diverge again. Maybe I go into my black moods because some event, some stimulus triggers something hiding just below my surface, sending me into a long downward spiral into what I like to refer to as the bottom muck of my subconscious. I don't think that was the case this time though, as nothing severe had happened recently, and I was doing well in school, for a change was not fighting with any of my friends, and I had just had a lovely conversation with my parents over the weekend, and once again, somehow miraculously, everything was fine there too.

As I had mentioned earlier, most of my friends were seriously worried about what had come over me. Other than the phone calls, they had also been e-mailing me over the college network wondering why I wasn't

answering my phone. Good thing I had a computer in my room, even if it was Macintosh. I might not have answered them, but it was a nice feeling that they wondered if I was still around.

My roommate was worried in a different way. I don't think he realized that I had taken his cigarettes, and he left me alone about the stereo. I think he was worried that I had mono, and was going to give it to him, even though he knew that I went to classes. I actually got quite a bit of work done in that period and managed to write a few more short stories. I had been suffering from writers' block since the previous semester, and had finally managed to break it. So maybe that was it, maybe I just needed to be alone to sort out my thoughts to get them on paper. God only knows it had to be something.

I guess it was on the third day of me avoiding everybody that someone knocked on the door. I was laying on my back on my bed in the second room just staring at the ceiling with the Charlie Sexton Sextet playing softly in the background. I guess it was around six o'clock when I heard a knocking on my door....

Green Dragon

Without a wing to carry him
He can fly as fast as a jet plane, his

Skin looking so rough that
its tenderness hides;

He can smell as well as wolves,
distinguishing even the odor of plague;

He looks as stupid as a three-eyed Martian,

concealing his piercing intelligence

He can see as far as from the
present to the future:
Pathetic? Euphoric?

...such a lazy stare...

-Mari Endo

WW I

Beautiful Victorian angels caught up
in tresses and whigs and wide round
lacy skirts tripping over their wings
and cracking their heads on foundations
hidden in the weeds.

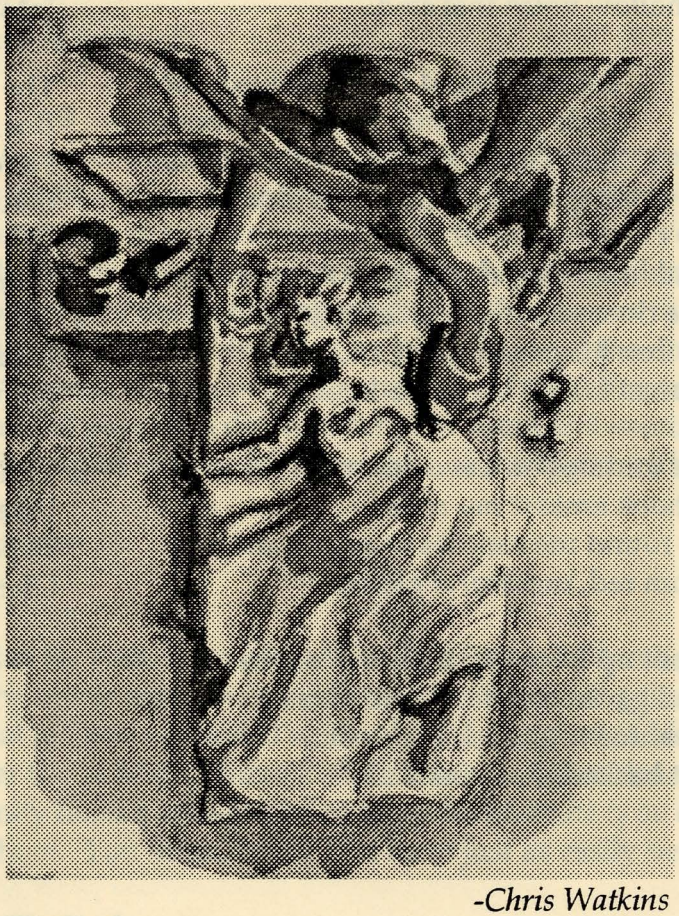
-Stephen Spotswood

Atheism Refuted

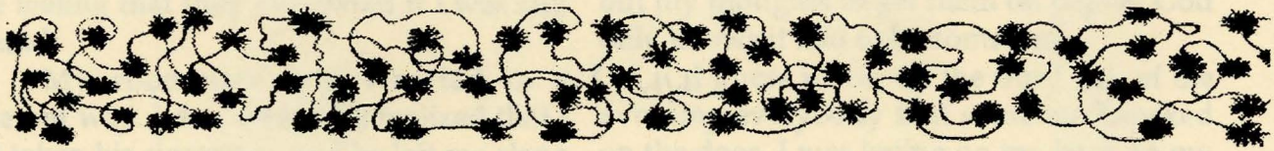
I think that there may be
a God after all—because

in you it's like Santa brought
everything on a Christmas
list I forgot to write but
he remembered anyway.

-Eva Kaplan-Leiserson



-Chris Watkins



-Karen DiLossi

The Thing Outside

The light within my chapel changed
From candle white to ember red
And from without the chamber came
A hollow voice that said:

> Pastor beyond this hallowed door,
> Hide you within your holy room?
> I challenge you: Step out! Step Out!
> Step out and face your doom!

With daunting challenge so pronounced,
The door received a mighty blow,
Its iron hinges strained and bent
'Gainst force I feared to know.

For minutes on the cold, stone floor
I shook amidst my robes,
As round me candles snapped and spat
From red, unnatural globes.

I rose up from my huddled stance
And glanced around with dread;
I wanted to unlock the door,
But backed away instead.

Left no other path to follow,
I brought my crucifix to bear
And looked into its frozen face,
Into its deathly stare.

The wooden man gazed through my eyes,
But nothing there he saw-
I had no meaning to him
Outside his faith and law.

I turned then to my family
They formed in my mind's eye
And I felt I still had meaning,
Some will yet still to try.

Thus from within me courage came:
I went back to the door;
I opened it and faced the air,
Obeying fear no more.

-Ryan McAllister

Choose Your Own Adventure:
You Are a Female College Student

-Heather Pilar

1

This is the story of a young woman in college and the events that occur over a few days. You will be asked to make choices and the outcome of your story will depend on them. The story is simplified to reflect only a few of the many options that might face a real student in these situations; however, it contains much truth.

Please, *turn to the next section* and begin your adventure.

2

You are a female college student. This is your second year at a small, liberal arts college in a small town. It is a Friday night. You sit in your dorm room alone. How to pass the time? You can stay in for the night, devoting it to a little studying or whatever movie is on television. There is also a party on campus. It is being held at a fraternity house and much of the student body will be there. The charge is three dollars for all the beer you can drink. The DJ is a student and not very good.

If you decide to stay in, turn to section 12.

If you want to go to the party later, turn to section 5.

3

Parties are for having a good time, of course. You decide to stay awhile and look for your friends. You fill your beer and have a few more until you become chatty. You join a group of girls that you know, dancing in a circle, sometimes in synchronization. At times, some of you are plucked from the circle to dance with one boy or another in duck-duck-goose fashion. Growing more silly, you sing along with your girlfriends to songs that lend themselves to it, generally carouse and enjoy yourself. As the party winds down, your group files out the door and you all begin walking toward the girls' dorms, with individuals straying off to their rooms as you pass their dorms. You climb the stairs of your own dorm, enter your room and execute your sleep preparations, all the while thinking over the various events of the night with a pleasant feeling. You sleep.

Your alarm signals you to awaken in section 16.

4

This evidence is presented at the trial: He claims she consented. His fraternity brothers give statements to the same effect, including interpreting the sounds they heard as being those of pleasure. A girlfriend of hers admits that Jen had expressed wishes to "hook up" with him. Jen recounts that she drank five beers over the period of three to four hours and was drunk.

Keith is found innocent. His fraternity hosts a well-attended party to celebrate (you do not go). Jennifer transfers to a nursing school. You think, could that have just as easily been me?

The End.

5

You decide to check out the social scene on this fine late September evening.

You begin to prepare for the party. Should you dress up? After all, you rarely have the excuse to flaunt your more formal wardrobe or experiment with more drastic make-up, as the accepted dress for class is casual. Then again, you don't want to attract unwanted attention – the line between proper party attire and the suggestive rags of a loose woman is a blurred one, and you also don't want to seem as though you're trying too hard.

If you decide to take the time to spruce up, turn to section 10.
If you decide you look appropriate enough in the clothes you wore to class, turn to section 8.

6

You butter your toast feeling a mix of sadness, anger and pity for the girl, Jennifer. "The whole reason they have these parties is to get girls drunk so they can hook up," you tell your table mates. "Girls need to realize this. Guys aren't really interested in *them*. Guys are only interested in their own crotches. Why weren't her sisters watching out for her?"

The girls sitting opposite you just continue to eat their cereal. "Aren't you mad?" you ask them in disbelief.

One girl speaks up. "I feel sorry for her if it's true, but we don't know what really happened. Anyway, it didn't happen to me."

"It could have happened to you."

"I'm not that dumb," she says, spooning another few corn flakes into her mouth.

You leave the cafeteria and walk to the library. Passing a row of fraternity houses, you feel sick and furious.

That night you attend a small gathering– of maybe fifteen people - with a friend. There are friends, acquaintances and a few people you don't know there. Drinking games are being played. At some point, as you sit around a table, you feel a jab to the back of your head. You turn around and see the male form of someone to whom you made clear you were not interested about a year and a half ago walking away. You have had a few beers and decide to confront this guy. "Why did you hit me in the back of the head?" you ask. "Because you are an annoying girl," he informs you. You take this scene in for a moment. You had not talked to him all night so you can only assume that any conversation that annoyed him was overheard. It occurs to you that the act of assaulting you, in however minor a way, from *behind* is outstandingly yellow. Your fury grows as you perceive that he has made this threat to you only because he knows there is nothing you can do about it.

Go on to the next section.

7

You are not physically equipped to challenge him. He is mentally deficient obviously. What to do? You have made a scene. No one has come to your aid. You are a bitch. You have to leave because the environment, mostly male, the females there are draped across the men, has become hostile. Have a nice night.

What has been happening to the date rapist? Find out in section 15.

8

You wouldn't want anyone to think you dressed up *just* for this party, as if you were *trying* to impress any guys, so you choose to stay in the same jeans and button-down shirt you wore to class. You brush your hair and sit down to watch a little *Grease* while you wait for the party to start. You mix and imbibe a couple rum and cokes for courage. During the last song of the movie, as we discover Rizzo's pregnancy was just "a false alarm," and the group vows to always remain friends, you draw a line around your eyes and paint your lips. You head to the party with three dollars in your back pocket.

The party's in section 13.

9

Returning to your table with a glass of cran-apple juice, you sit and relate your position. "She must have known those guys would be trying to get her into bed. That's why they *have* these parties. I think it was her responsibility to know when to go home by herself. She ought to know how to drink responsibly. She's an adult. This isn't high school. Of course, it sucks if she was raped, but I suspect she probably went home with him, had sex and then felt guilty the next morning. She knew everyone would think she was easy. With a clear head, it must have occurred to her that by dinnertime, every guy in his frat would know all about it. Dumb chick."

A girl sitting across from you says she saw the girl in question, Jennifer, leaving with the guy, Keith, a prominent member of the soccer team. "I knew that she had a crush on him. At the picnic last week, we were discussing him. When I saw her walking with him, I was happy for her; I thought she was lucky. He looked like a nice guy, she was holding onto his arm. I guess I should have asked her if she was okay, just to make sure she knew what she was doing."

The case develops in section 18.

10

You begin to choose a dress from your closet. You pick a flirty little number in pale yellow and lay it on the chair. You remove your clothes, step into your robe and head to the bathroom where you take a shower and shave your legs. Back in your room, you comb then blow-dry your hair, using a brush to coax it into a style worn by a woman in a blue jeans advertisement. You then begin to layer on makeup as *Grease* plays. You apply concealer first to any blemish or discolored spots. You begin to blend foundation over this through "Look at Me, I'm Sandra Dee." As Olivia Newton-John details her heartbreak in "Hopelessly Devoted," you apply eye-shadow and liner, with an article in *Allure* as your guide. You look into your hand mirror held at arm's length and decide you don't like the effect this style gives. You wipe it off and choose a more conventional application. While John Travolta, as Danny, tries to letter in any sport to win back his sweetheart, you scan the mirror for little hairs to pluck in order to keep the shape of your eyebrows clean. By the time Danny wins the drag race and Sandy has resolved to change her look, you have added and removed various hair accessories and finally decided to remain with your original hairstyle. You put on your stockings and dress. You apply lipstick after a final sip of water. You are ready to go but decide to watch the appearance of transformed Sandy and the subsequent rendition of "You Better Shape Up" for inspiration, sitting primly on the edge of the bed so as not to wrinkle the dress. Turning off the television, you slip on your shoes and leave, grasping three folded dollar bills in your fist.

Go to section 13.

11

You fill your cup with beer. Halfway through your third, you become more haphazard; you drain the cup and gather its courage. You station yourself near the object of your intentions and ingratiate yourself into becoming his dance partner. Throughout the song both your movements become more suggestive. You both journey to the keg, fill, and deplete your cups. During the next song you dance in such a way that your hips seem to be grinding against his leg. He leads you outside so you can talk and while sipping a last beer, you allow him to influence you with his charm, wit, reputation, physique or status on the lacrosse team. You join him in his room. You complete various stages of hooking up until at some point sleep overcomes you and you awaken at seven a.m. the next day. You gather and reposition whatever clothes you may have removed, find your shoes and quietly shut the door to his room, leaving him snoring and sprawled across the bed. You walk back to your dorm, hoping no one sees you. You're home free; no one is up this early. Back in your room, you return to sleep for a few more hours.

The sun shines brightly through your window blinds in section 16.

12

You settle in for the night, changing into a comfortable pair of sweat pants. You begin to read your biology assignment, highlighting the text as you go through. As the hour approaches nine o'clock, you hear the bustle of the girls on your hall traveling between one another's rooms, drinking a few wine coolers or lite beers as pre-party refreshment. When you enter the bathroom you must use the sink between two girls who are curling their hair and blending eye-shadow. You return to your room. The movie tonight is *Grease*. You're psyched. You make microwave popcorn and sing along to "Summer Lovin'" and try to match Olivia's high notes on "Hopelessly Devoted to You." Eventually you become sleepy and sack it in for the night, though you periodically hear the voices of boys in the hallway, the slurred speech of drunk girls being helped to the bathroom, and too much giggling. You finally fall asleep. Good night.

Sleep until section 16.

13

From fifty yards away, you hear the base drum thumping in the depths of some synthesized club mix. You get to the door and surrender your cash and are handed a beer. You crack it open and glance around the room. You must decide your objective for the evening. The main reasons for attending a party are usually interrelated, but what is your *goal*? Are you interested in getting drunk and getting the most out of your entrance fee? Have you come to socialize, talk to friends, dance, and meet new people? Or are you looking to hook up – to choose a person who appeals to you outwardly, meet them and persuade them to become to some degree intimate with you?

If you are there to drink, the keg's in section 14.

If you see a group of friends across the room, meet them in section 3.

If you've already spotted your crush, make your way to him in section 11.

14

You empty the cup in your hand and stand in line at the keg. Two people behind you is a friend whom you've known since your freshman year. You pull them up to stand behind you and cement your plans to join them in a night of binge drinking. Woo-hoo! You discuss the poor quality of the music as you both hover near the keg. After you've downed six or seven cups, you begin to forget that the music playing was popular four years ago (and you thought it was bad then), that you attend a school full of lame people, and you both make your way to the dance floor. You move crazily to the beat with your partner, inventing new dances that properly fit the shoddy qualities of the DJ's selections. During the songs that you absolutely loathe, you refill your beers. Finally you feel drunk enough. You stumble home, pull off your clothes and fall into bed. Sweet dreams.

Wake up in section 16.

15

You investigate ways to form a women's group on your campus during the week preceding the trial. You have been thinking over the various, seemingly harmless, incidents of sexist behavior you've witnessed or heard about since you've been at college. Your roommate freshman year was molested by her date to the campus formal. She had had a few glasses of wine, and not being a heavy drinker, her state was altered enough to allow him to touch her in ways she later regretted. At the time, you had trouble believing her story, calculating the number of drinks over the number of hours during which she consumed them (all before they left the dance), you could hardly believe that she could have been that drunk. Anyway, you were also friends with her date.

Earlier in the month, a friend of yours related what had happened to her at a fraternity-sorority semi-formal party. She had been standing in a group with two girlfriends when she was pushed, jostled really, but being in heels and unprepared, she fell to the ground. She looked up and saw the guy who had bumped her giving the OK sign to an ex-boyfriend of hers who stood above the scene, on the stairs. She concluded, logically, that the male she had stopped dating, *nearly eight months ago,* had coerced his buddy into serving as proxy for his retaliation.

These are the most extreme examples. Numerous times men on the campus have made outrageous remarks, used offensive language and generally acted in ways that indicated their disrespect for women. It has become so common that no one realizes the underlying seriousness of these attitudes; instead, they accept the explanation proffered by the guys: "It's just a joke."

The trial turns out this way: Jennifer cannot prove the assault, in a state of shock, she says, she destroyed important evidence. Keith goes free, walking from the courtroom amid the joyful shouts of his brothers. You receive the news, become teary, throw your desk chair at the wall and read the brochures you've been sent from N.O.W. (The National Organization of Women).

The End.

16

You wake up, rubbing sleep away with a finger over each eyelid. You drink some water and decide to shower. You gather your bath items and bathe. You dress, dry your hair and go to brunch. Over scrambled eggs and waffles, you listen to the rumors that a date rape took place the previous evening. How do you react? Do you immediately sympathize with the female victim, angry because you are shocked that some guy would even attempt such an act? Or do you suspect, knowing what you do of that particular couple, that it is partially her fault, especially since she drank to the point of making herself vulnerable? Maybe you have mixed emotions – after all, it is just a rumor, you haven't heard a complete story from either party involved.

Men are slime, of course he did it. Turn to section 6.
What did she think was going to happen when he invited her to his room? Turn to section 9.
You wait to see how the case develops and turn to section 17.

17

You aren't sure how to react. People are innocent until proven guilty. You are inclined to believe someone who makes an accusation as serious as rape, but the guy being accused, Keith, is in your physics class. You've worked in lab together and you can hardly believe he would be capable of that kind of violence. The account you listen to runs this way: Keith claims that Jen approached him, began dancing with him and agreed to accompany him to his room. There, she consented to sex.

Jen says she was drunk. She remembers talking with him and walking to his room, although she thought it was only a stop and that he would continue to walk her home. In his room, she says, she must have fallen asleep. She woke up and he was on top of her and she passed out again.

You have a vague memory of seeing them walking out the door, holding hands.
The trial takes place in section 4.

18

The following comes to light at the trial: Keith knew Jennifer was drunk; under laws of this state, she is unable to give her consent and the sex act was therefore rape. He is thrown out of school, spends six months in jail and is released. You hear that he is paying fines, doing community service and applying to another college in the mid-west. Jen remains in school and for a few weeks after is the victim of a number of telephone assaults and cruel desk graffiti. She transfers to a school near her hometown. The incident passes from your mind, except that you sometimes miss him, your physics lab partner, when you are having particular trouble finding the velocity of an object.

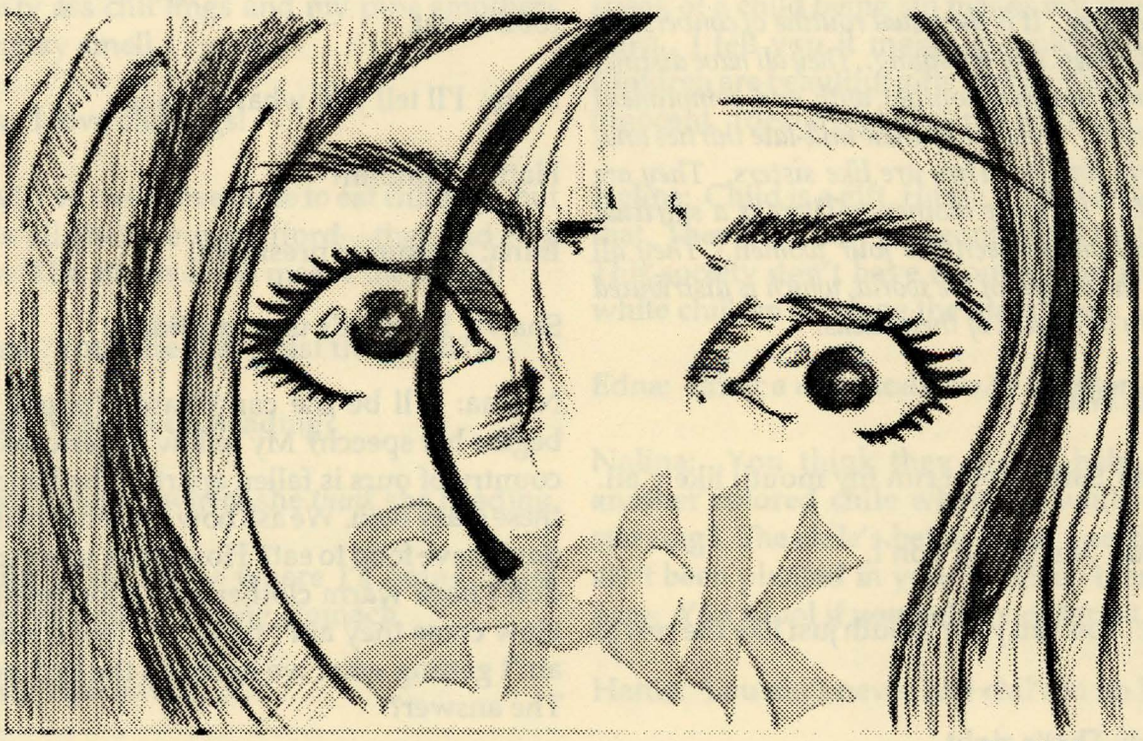
The End.

Jesus on the Bus

Jesus rode the city bus yesterday, preaching
among the common folk like it was the good
old days. Telling a drooping middle-aged
woman about blacks and breast cancer.

Jesus herself was black and thin and loving
and mouthy. Then she told this kid she loved
him, this kid she didn't even know, this kid
who was misbehaving, and she said "God bless
you, sweetheart" as he stalked off the bus.

-Eva Kaplan-Leiserson



-Pearl Pham

Songs of Women

-Jackie Smith

"How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?"

-Maria W. Stewart, 1831

"Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy, which is why they can survive the suffering and humiliation inflicted upon them. They are alive physically and emotionally, which makes them easy to live with."

-Mirella Ricciardi, African Saga, 1982

Scene One

Buffalo, New York 1941. The women are sitting outside, as they usually do on Sunday afternoons. They are in a row in kitchen chairs that are mismatched. It is the usual routine of conversing, complaining, and gossiping. They all have distinct personalities that conflict with and compliment each other. They are in their mid-late thirties and/or early forties. They are like sisters. They are friends. They are mothers. There is a spiritual connection between the four women. They all carry the weight of the world, which is distributed equally onto each of their backs.

Edna: What?

Hattie: Said I don't run my mouth like y'all.

Nalina: Shit if you don't.

Edna: You run your mouth just like the rest of us.

Shawl: That's right.

Edna: When there's silence us knows summant ain't right.

Shawl: I'ma say little summant more bout these mens.

Hattie: Yeah?

Shawl: It ain't only in the bedroom where the job ain't right. Now don't get me wrong ain't no love lost cause I loves the mens.

Nalina: All know the same.

Shawl: We can see how silly they's with this country.

Nalina: They done tore it apart -

Hattie: - that's why we ain't got barely enough food to eat.

Edna: I'll tell you what us needs.

Hattie: Hmmm?

Edna: A woman president!

Shawl: We needs us a candidate!

Nalina: I'll be the candidate. (pause and begins her speech) My fellow Americans this country of ours is fallen apart in the hands of these crazy men. We ask how come our chil'ren don't have food to eat? How come us womens don't have warm clothes and good heating? How come they ain't no jobs? How come we ain't getting what we needs in the bedroom? The answer?

All: Men.

Hattie: A black woman president? Abe and

George and all the rest would die twice if that ever happen.

Nalina: That's the truth.

Edna: Let them die twice. (slightly distracted by the smell of the pipe smoke.) That smell good. What it is?

Shawl: Cherry tabacco.

Edna: Just like a man with that pipe in your mouth, rubber boots on your feet, and your legs gapped open showing everyone your bidness.

Nalina: My granddaddy use to sit like that with his body slumped over and the legs spread as wide as the Arkansas river.

Shawl: Hell, gal, lemme be. I likes my pipe. It ain't only mens who likes it. I've always liked my pipe. The smell of the tabacco. I loves it especially these days cause all I seem to cook is nasty ass chit'lings and my pipe smothers the funky smell.

Edna: I love chitlings!

Shawl: I've never been one to eat chitlings, but that's all that we can afford—that and hog maw. The stinch alone makes me vomit.

Nalina: You sure that's just the smell?

Hattie: Where you heading?

Shawl: I donno where she *think* she heading.

Nalina: You know where I's going cause honey you gots a strong stomach.

Shawl: Hell naw.

Nalina: You sure?

Shawl: I ain't!

Nalina: Praise the lord.

Shawl: Hell naw!

Edna: It would be something for you to bring a child in the world today. It'd be a sin.

Hattie: (slightly devasted) Oh, Edna.

Nalina: She ain't lying.

Shawl: (affirming) A sin.

Edna: Bring a child into this world today is to murder it.

Nalina: Wouldn't have enough milk in the teats to feed the baby. The poor thing would starve.

Shawl: Don't you worry bout another child coming from me.

Hattie: A child is a gift from God! Hear you speak of a child being sin makes my stomach burn. I tell you it makes my ulcers bleed. Children are beautiful gifts sent by God. They innocent. (declaring) Chil'ren ain't sin.

Nalina: Child is a gift, Hattie, I must testify to that. They's but how you gonna feed that gift? This society don't have enough food for the white chil'ren let alone the black ones.

Edna: Bring a child today *is* to murder it.

Nalina: You think they gonna help feed another colored chile when the white ones starving? The chile's better off as a seed that ain't been planted in your stomach then out here. You's fool if you believe different.

Hattie: You ain't never like chil'ren no how.

Nalina: Ain't never said that.

Hattie: (deliberately) You ain't got none of

your own.

Nalina: (laughing) Stop playing the fool, woman. I can't have *none* of my own. You've known that for years that I can't borne chil'ren. It ain't in me to have any and sometimes thank God for messing me up.

Shawl: Hattie, y'know you wrong for that.

Hattie: (ignoring Shawl) Thank Him?

Nalina: I sure do. Thank you Lord! Look at how them chil'ren of yours is wasting away from this mess. It's tearing all you womens down seeing your chil'ren starve in front of your own eyes.

Edna: Ain't starving.

Nalina: God has spared me. (mocking) Thank you Jesus! I couldn't take one of my chil'ren coming to me with their wide eyes and empty stomachs crying they hungry, and I can't do anything but sit with hands full of nothing.

Edna: I'll starve myself and my husband before my chil'ren starve.

Hattie: I think us all feel the same.

Nalina: (to Edna) Seems you's wasting away.

Edna: Ain't wasting no where, Nalina.

Shawl: As long as we's here ain't none of us gonna starve. As y'all say we's a circle. Long as the circle strong us strong.

Hattie: She right.

Shawl: (Blowing the smoke out of her mouth slowly.) I heard from some folks that us might go to war.

Hattie: I hear the same.

Shawl: I believe we gonna fight. I'sa gut feeling. The things I hear I knows the truth. Rumor has it that people being murder in groups over seas.

Edna: Ain't no different then these white folks killing us blacks here and now.

Nalina: I ain't never been a woman to support war.

Edna: (irritated) How come they ain't saying war for us? How come they ain't crying injustice for us? Is us invisible?

Nalina: You know they blind to us. Been they way for hundreds and summant years.

Hattie: They thinking about war—we gonna war.

Edna: We should war in this country. We needs a war here.

Nalina: That's the only war I'll support.

Edna: The shit that goes on here kills me.

Shawl: Speak.

Edna: My brother was murder down south four years ago and folks didn't see it.

Nalina: Concerning a black man..hell no.

Edna: Say some white woman was climbing up on a ladder with a dress on. My brother was walking down the street and happen to look up. He didn't know she was up there.

Shawl: Don't matter.

Hattie: Not here it don't.

Edna: They beat him, cut him up and hung him. Corner say he was still alive when they was cutting him to piecies. Coroner say he felt

every damn thing they did to the point he was hung.

Nalina: Have mercy on his soul Jesus!

Edna: There's wrong in the world today, but how come they want to pay attention to all the world's wrong when we gots wrongs here!

Hattie: Testify.

Nalina: Us know your feeling.

Shawl: God knows I know.

Nalina: It's given at birth. The feeling of total emptiness. A feeling that lies in the pit of your stomach and stays there trapped.

Hattie: All black folk's born with the gift.

Nalina: It's hard to live in this world that's against us as blacks and again as womens, but what choice do we have but to survive?

Hattie: Ain't a choice it's a command.

Edna: Unhum.

Shawl: We all have a story. All of us.

Edna: Unhum.

Shawl: We got pain and sorrow cause of this skin, breast, and twat.

Edna: I say there's wrong.

Shawl: I sit and think to myself why *Lord, why, have you given us so much agony? What us do to deserve it? Why has it been us, Lord? Why has it been us?* And I don't get no answer. Never! So I just sit there until I get tired of sitting and I'll go smoke my pipe or mind my chil'ren. My mind wanders. I tell you it do go by itself for minutes and hours at a time.

Nalina: I don't even think the Lord got an answer for that question.

Hattie: Say the Lord works in mysterious ways.

Edna: So it said.

Hattie: He's all knowing.

Nalina: All knowing?

Hattie: That's right.

Nalina: He like to see his chil'ren suffer? That what you saying?

Shawl: That what she say.

Hattie: Everything by for His reasoning, not ours.

Nalina: That Edna brother being lynched is because He all knowing. He want that? You're chil'ren starving, men going off to war, no work, no life is cause he all knowing? Shit, what He know?

Hattie: You say yourself he know not to give you no chil'ren.

Nalina: What that gotta do with us right here and right now?

Hattie: You ain't got no extra mouths to feed.

Nalina: Who you lying to? I know ain't birthed my own chil'ren but y'alls is like my own. I feeds them.

Hattie: There's a reason for all things.

Edna: So it said.

Shawl: I wish he'd gimme some answer. Summant to make me see why us like this. That's all.

Nalina: Like you say, Shawl, some answer is better than none—

Hattie: Edna, you know that the Lord's word's law.

Shawl: Only want a answer. I don't think that's too much, is it?

Nalina: Woman, no.

Edna: Some say some answers when you get 'em you don't want 'em.

Hattie: How you gonna question the Lord?

Nalina: The same way we question you.

Hattie: Blasphemy!

Edna: Some call it that.

Shawl: Blasphemy? Shit! A quesiton?

Hattie: Blasphemy!

Shawl: The Lord can handle that, can't He? If He can't He ain't got no bidness as Lord.

Hattie: God, you made her you know her better than anyone else.

Shawl: Don't try to get all religious-safed and saintified on me, Hattie! You forget I knew you back when before religion stepped in your life.

Hattie: I am safed and saintified in the name of Jesus.

Shawl: Done known you to do many things while you've been safed and saintified, honey. Don't act like I'm some stranger from the streets. I've been living in your back yard for years.

Hattie: What you saying?

Nalina: I know y'all like I know myself.

Shawl: Just remember that, Mizz Safed and Stantified!

Hattie: You need to pick up The Bible and read.

Shawl: I done picked up my Bible and I have set it down and picked it up. That book don't have all the answers.

Hattie: I ain't gonna have you speaking bout the Book like that.

Nalina: Hattie, you forgetting your own tongue.

Edna: She right.

Shawl: Don't get a little liquor in you, Hattie, that's when you really testify.

Hattie: Ain't paying attention to y'all. Y'all just as silly as the men you complain about.

Shawl: Complain? Is that what we do?

Nalina: Don't think it be complaining.

Edna: It ain't complaining.

Shawl: I say it's relating. Telling some news...telling the truth. Sometime the truth hurt—sometime it feel so good—sometime it feel bad—guess the truth be like sex.

Hattie: (slightly laughing) Knew you'd be there again.

Shawl: Ain't nothing wrong with the truth, Hattie.

Nalina: Sometimes it's good. When you get to shivering and squeeling—mmmm! I call on God a lot when that happens.

Hattie: In vain.

Nalina: It ain't in vain.

Edna: When the job's done right or shall I say when the truth is really told.

Shawl: Yes that's it, woman.

Edna: Say when the truth is really told...that's when it's right.

Hattie: So now y'all playing preacher -man.

Nalina: Only if he doing the right kind of preaching, honey.

Hattie: Y'know you wrong.

Nalina: Say you don't like that certain truth.

Hattie: Now I didn't go that far. As Shawl say...us do need some of that truth.

Shawl: Amen!

Hattie: And I need the truth just as much as any woman.

Nalina: I hear you.

Shawl: Now if us could only get our men to get to that good truth every time. Now I could really testify.

Nalina: Yeah, need to get them straight sometime...not all of them are bad.

Hattie: That's right.

Shawl: I've known a couple of men who's really straight and good and know only the truth.

Edna: Seems that's the men we let get away.

Nalina: Why us do that?

Edna: I donno that answer.

Shawl: I think only God know that answer and He ain't too willing to give that answer. He don't wonna be upright and straight with us.

Edna: Only woman He ever been straight with is Eve, and that was to tell her she brought the end of the world.

Lights fade.

Frank & Stephanie

-Paul Davis

Frank Garcia sits smoking a cigarette at the end of the long midnight blue bar. Surrounding the ashtray in a circular stacked pattern also sit twenty shot glasses. In the ashtray is a full double shot of bourbon. His hair looks drywashed a hundred times over tonight. The cute barmaid did it, so did the prostitute who thought he looked stupid enough to take her. Mostly it was him though, when his fingers weren't clutched around the filter of a cigarette or a shot glass. The smoke shimmies up the locks of dead blood-black hair to assimilate itself into the haze in the room, just above his head. The keeper mumbles something about last call, shaking his head in disgust at the broken man at the end of the midnight blue alcoholic's road. Frank lifts the edge of the shot to his lips; ashes from the tray grind into the stubble on his chin. He sucks down smoke and bourbon into his blackened lungs and wretched stomach. His eyes, are nothing more than brown dead-pools tethered by red barbed wire to the tears bleeding down his face. Why could she leave him?

Stephanie Caporusso ran across the street to greet her best friend, Meghan, at the Metropolitan Opera. The New York Philharmonic will play the accompianment to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, a beautiful, haunting piece of genius. Her dress is black and sheer, rhinestones dotting a low but modest neckline. A slow avenue wind crashes into her lower back-length curls of honey-brown. She is laughing with her chin and eyes. A whole conversation passes between them before the light changes. A European hug and kiss fly into perfect pitch harmonies of "The Rose", and "Secret Garden." Like a cloudless Long Island moon set over the Sound her eyes flicker a million lights, like Connecticut. A snide comment slides off her rounded ears from a trench coated lonely waste of flesh to hang on her lobes like rain-earrings. Defiance and mock-control guide little feet faster toward the entrance to stare at Chagall and have sex with Mozart. She is ready. She doesn't need anyone, but, her. Love.

Black used leather shoes meet pavement uneasily, afraid that they may get mugged any minute. Black bourbon stained slacks stretch and strain to hold in knees and calf muscles that want to give up their professions. Black trench coat drags its superfluous face along McAdam-muck and homeless piss. Frank Garcia, shirt opened down to his hairy navel, pukes in a tree's cage. His grated face shattered against wrought-iron, freeing the blood that had turned his nose red to swim in forcefully ejected bourbon, bile, and pain. Staring into the mess that had become his last 48 hours he is reminded of the Museum of Art. He had walked like a Fury pursuing an indecisive avenger to find the Frenchman Dégas's Loves. His ladies of perfect grace, strength, beauty, motion, emotion, were what Frank had made her to be. He wanted her to see what she was, what he knew she was. She hated Dégas. Puking again draws him from dreams of disappointment and into the flow of real disappointment. A crawling man is a helpless child unable to yet walk, and a broken hero unable to look those still holding honor in the eyes. He failed. Her Love was lost to what hangs limp and shriveled between his legs now. All he wants to do is get back what was lost. Forever, like Sisyphus, he will push this boulder, or bourbon, up the mountain, only to be crushed again and again. "How can I live?" Reverberating a billion times like an

Eno Pachalbel, pain. In despair, where does one find hope? For Frank Garcia, in this state, dreams of sleeping, pounding at the pavement with tired feet; wakes home alive but not living.

"Her life has been sweet," say the rhinestones on her dress to her perfect breasts; "as a dew-dipped strawberry in July." A singing D.J., big and dear, in a flash of chords captured her heart as it fell trying to fly away from the hurt. Inside she knew that Mozart had written this piece just for her to remember sneaking kisses, with the D.J., like a Catholic school girl with a shot of bourbon behind the statue of St. John.

For a year she had dreamt of seeing the Don Giovanni, with her Love, but he couldn't go. To her it was the greatest opera ever written; Love, intrigue, sex, fear, sin, redemption, and the most beautiful music. It played in her house when he had kissed her, strong but gently, taking all from and giving more to her. He was everything and nothing at once, his hands caressing places that had never been touched before. Wet, raw, soft, hard strong and weak places that she had felt herself alone.

This opera she had seen a few times, on video and in her own life. Seeming to appear magically from darkness, he had arrived at her, back door all in black. Hair long and wet from the spring showers had curled into a spiral down his face. Her mother had told her that he was not allowed in the house when mom was out; but Stephanie Caporusso needed touch then. She let him in and let him touch her and kiss her and carry her and make her wetter than a waterfall. Breaking her fear with caring and passion she gave herself to him and got something she had not expected. Love. There, in his arms she knew why he had walked the miles in the rain, had tossed everything else away that was important to living. To Love her was all he wanted in life. She ended it that night. It was too much to handle with his insistence and utter devotion. Blind faith had kept her from doing it before. Now it was all she could do. "Repent! Repent!" Screams the Commandatoré to Don Giovanni. "You have sinned, and you will suffer." Suffering unending for creating something that wasn't there. The opera ends but her tears still flow. Desire like a river splashing on rhinestones between perfect breasts into emptiness.

I hear all the tales like a window pane listens to the raindrops. I rearrange the grime with a gray stained rag on all the glasses in the bar and watch them all come in.

I hear all the tales like a window pane listens to the raindrops. I rearrange the grime with a gray stained rag on all the glasses in the bar and watch them all come in. My name is Natas Rimadll bartender at the Crossroads Inn. When you tell me a tale I can feel it. They come out like a string of intestines through the navel of a sinner when he realizes he has been a lying coward all his life. These intestines land on the bar and squirm and retch foulness in your drink and splash blood in your eyes. You either run away screaming like a just-raped girl, blood dripping down your legs from the pain, or you suck down your drink full of shit, blood, disease, and body fluids and order another. Nobody is wishy-washy in the Crossroads. Too many tales swimming like rotting fish in the minds of her patrons. I call her a "her" because she is woman. A real woman. She knows what she wants, fucks you, and then gets it. Leaves you a lonely castrated John, sitting in your car next to your cock praying to all the gods that you can count to die right the fuck then. I ramble. Sorry. These things happen.

Let me tell you about a kid named Jeremy...

Office

-Ray Cummings

It's Monday after class. I am sitting in Connor's office in an uncomfortable wooden chair and I'm crushing a copy of this story I wrote. I can't feel my hands anymore or the stapled pages; my fingers trembled with rage a few minutes ago but now they've settled. Connor is smoking a pipe, too calmly, smoking Borkum Riff, the cheap stuff. He too is sitting, behind his mahogany desk, concentrating on the spiced smoke that seeps out of his pipe, stains everything. His seat is black, leather, swivels.

The room is thick with tension and the spirit essence of pipe tobacco and I still can't speak. I'm too stunned even to ask permission to light a cigarette.

Connor finally takes the pipe from his lips and says something about how beautiful the fjords in Ireland are, but I miss the first part of what he says and anyway, I don't care. The pipe is played. Connor finally clears his throat, shifts again. He looks like an actor from one of those British comedies - that one about the fruity department store - which makes it very difficult to take him seriously.

"About your...story, Mr. Collins - you intended to submit it for the fiction contest?"

"Yes," I manage to say. "It's the best I've written this semester."

Connor sighs, shifts in his seat again, shakes his head - and suddenly I feel like he's my doctor, I'm his patient - he's about to tell me that I have ebola, lukemia, something terminal. What he finally says is worse: "Mr. Collins, we need to talk about your writing style. You've probably noticed that I scrawled the word "NO", with a period, on every page of your story in huge red letters..."

I swallow, throat dry. I had definitely noticed.

"...I think the problem with your fiction is simply this: **it's too incomplete**. It's as though you absorb everyday situations as they unfold, then spit them back out in vignette-sized portraits. When I read - what's the name of that story you're wringing there?"

I sigh. "Diner," I reply.

"When I read Diner, I found myself falling asleep, Mr. Collins. It's just...two people in one place, the *same* place, having a quasi-conversation - and this same premise runs through *every one of your stories*. And frankly, if you're not going to change scenes in the real time of the story or introduce flashback sequences, the dialogue should be pretty damn engaging." He pauses, then continues. "And what do we have here? Two bored girls, sipping coffee and talking about 80s screen stars and clothes...and their characters..." Connor pauses again, "...they aren't defined enough. It's as though the same person was having a conversation with herself."

"Believe it or not," I say, "People really do talk that way. It's called realism."

Connor sighs, then falls silent, then asks, "You weren't planning to write for a living, were you?"

"Actually, I was," my confidence revives, "And I've been published."

Published. That word should stop Connor cold, but it only makes him smirk. I can't believe this asshole is just now doubting my writing ability - after four straight semesters!

"Being published doesn't really mean anything," he snorts. "There are thousands of struggling writers, millions, many of them are doing exceptional things, but they'll never come to any fame. Do you know why this is?"

"Because they're submitting to the wrong editors?"

"EXACTLY!!! And for every innovative

final draft that hits the desk of the Fiction Editor at The Atlantic Monthly, there twenty-five from writers like *you* to bury it under!"

"Wait a minute. Why couldn't you have told me all of this two terms back?" It's hard to suppress the edge in my voice. I should leap to my feet, pull out a pistol, make him beg for his gray life, the bastard.

"When you first came to me two years ago, you wrote as you do now: a flat, gray hybrid of Ernest Hemingway and Bret Easton Ellis. Little elaboration of backdrops or characters. Just two people talking - each representative of a different perception of an idea. One communicates in noncommittal verbal language, the other speaks mostly in a sort of vague body language..."

"And what else?" I almost say *asshole.*

"I'm trying to find the most sensitive way to phrase this, Mr. Collins..."

"Why bother? You've already been bracingly blunt in your trashing of my work."

"If it's all the same to you, then the heck with it. But first, I have a question...were you really planning to... write for a living? To write books and sustain yourself?"

"Yes, and I still intend to, despite the cynicism of certain others."

"Well...have you considered doing something else with your life? Something that might better befit your particular capabilities in life? It's never too late to become an auto mechanic or a gas station attendant. And I hear that Dallas is always looking for more air-conditioning repairmen..."

"No, I haven't. And I also have yet to call 'The Lincoln Technical Institute.'"

"Very amusing. But back to your writing - your stories also seem to have a way of becoming pure dialogue towards the end; it's as if the author is too lazy to provide the reader with more details about his characters than can be culled from what is said. And your characters don't have much to say that's meaningful. Let's look at the sparkling Feldman dialogue on page three:

LEXA: "Corey Feldman's sexy. I wanna cut off his head and fuck him."

LIZ: "Whatever."

LEXA: "Did you ever wonder what God dreams about?"

LIZ: "No, because I don't care. Now, shut up, and go back to acting vacant."

Scintillating....

If you want to be a famous writer, Mr. Collins, your references to pop culture need to be a little more subtle...they need to blend into the background...but there doesn't seem to be any background. For example, there was a scene early on in Diner where one of the girls made a reference to *The Breakfast Club*, and then the rest of the story grew out of that comment. In the fabric of a short story, *many* socio-cultural tidbits should make up the quilt, instead of *one* tidbit being expanded into a quilt. Did you see *Clerks*?"

"No, why?"

"Just curious. But I would have liked to have known what the diner girls were doing while they were discussing Ally Sheedy's career. Were they drinking coffee? Eating pie? Doing the Macarena? And how did people entering and leaving change the diner's chemistry? Where the hell was the waitress? THAT is realism, Mr. Collins."

"Let me explain something to you. To those two self-centered girls in that diner - the only thing that mattered, the essential reality - was the fact that *they* were there. Employees, truckers, etc. - all those people became irrelevant when those high school seniors walked in and sat in a booth. The reader is, in a sense, blinded by the narcissism of the central characters."

"Mr. Collins, have you ever read *A Perfect Day For Bananafish* by J.D. Salinger?"

"Of course I have."

"Read it again. Then one more time. Then read your story again. Believe it or not, you can improve on what you've written."

"How so?"

"Body language *screams*, Mr. Collins. Do you understand? Without it, you're stranding the reader in wilting dialogue, and

no one likes being stranded. And *another thing*...before you embark on a story, try to map out a plot line. Define a conflict. Sketch a rough background for your characters. How did they meet, what do they have in common, that sort of thing. It's important that one character does not merely exist as a sounding block for the other to rattle off his ideas and opinions at length. Concise. Your dialogue should be concise. A first-person narrator should be the best-defined character in a work of fiction, and should have the most to say. Present your narration in a linear, organized fashion, so that your readers won't get lost. There should be direction, and a clear *reason* for the work being written. Try to give your characters surnames and Christian names that don't sound alike so the reader won't get confused. Don't try to cram too much information into one monologue. And a proper sense of closure is *fundamental*."

"How so?"

"Well, your story ends with one of the girls naming super models. So what the reader has seen is a snippet of their time at the diner, instead of a snippet of their lives - i.e., the whole of their time in the diner. Why, for all I know, they could die from food poisoning. Now, listen closely, Mr. Collins, to the names of these distinguished literary figures: Samuel Johnson, James Joyce, William Gibson, Dylan Thomas, Charles Aaron..."

What Boredom Inspires Me To Do

1. She Chooses Me

I often have this fantasy while daydreaming during boring college classes: a man with a gun charges into the room. He is a pervert who takes pleasure in watching people fuck. He points a gun at a girl's head (a girl in the class, any girl in the class) and says that she must fuck one of the guys in the room. She looks around.

She chooses me.

2. What I Know to Be True:

- There are things I think I know.
- Life is sad and funny.
- Fucking is just kissing with different parts of the body.
- I like making love when it's windy. I hate being alone.

3. What I Do Not Know:

- Men who are not circumsized can have multiple orgasms.

_ true _ false

-Kevin Hoffman

Alzheimer's Verse

You trip over your colours
and you're never punctual

the clock's been broken
for weeks, abysmal

nothing replaced
the constant chik-chock

and no one wants to fix
it and my husband never

talks, or breathes a breath
of sigh when sitting

in his chair two feet
from the endtable

and he never combed
his hair anymore and I

have to brush his teeth
with my finger and cats

have been walking through
the living room, Bobby's

never home and I wonder
where the stove is who

moved it to the side
of the bathroom

under the sink I'm watching
the mousetrap slide slowly

into the water and I don't
know who my neighbors

are they told me that
my husband's dead

a stroke and cancer
and i need milk 2%

and I don't know
who that boy is that

visits me and who are i
who am i when
that, when what.....

when did my Jimmy die?

-Stephen Spotswood